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Gothic Literature and the Politics of Indistinction
by
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A dissertation presented to the
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The whole universe is in constant flux or perpetual mutation . . . in this endless progress, the same atom of matter may pass through every possible Combination, the whole circle of possibilities may be exhausted, and perhaps the same coincidents & combinations frequently repeated. It is no less credible that every possible modification of human society and of individual mind may, at some period or other be called into being.

CHARLES BROCKDEN BROWN, in a letter to "Susan Godolphin" (1793)

INTRODUCTION

“VARIETIES OF UNTRIED BEING”

Although the Gothic is a tremendously versatile mode, terror remains central to its definition.¹ Eric Savoy, for example, has argued that any “theory of gothic cultural production . . . is necessarily invested in a poetics of terror.”² Scholars often connect this terror to political fears, particularly when they address the turn of the nineteenth century, the so-called “age of democratic revolutions.” Angela Wright, for example, argues that the Gothic shifts at the turn of the century “from reclaiming an ‘immemorial past’ in the 1760s and 1770s to evoking clear and direct connotations of terror in the 1790s, particularly as the Reign of Terror commenced in revolutionary France.”³ This line of argument originates at the turn of the nineteenth century, when figures such as the Marquis de Sade argued that Gothic fiction was “the inevitable result of the revolutionary shocks which all of Europe had suffered.”⁴ The political nature of this revolutionary fear was perhaps best articulated in 1983 by Ronald Paulson, who argued that “the gothic tended to be the form adopted by those who were either against or merely intrigued by the Revolution, or by problems of freedom and compulsion”—even if, like Sade, those figures were considered politically radical themselves.⁵ This mode of understanding the Gothic as political fear has continued to haunt the critical landscape of Gothic studies in the work of scholars such as Fred Botting, Teresa A. Goddu, and Carol Margaret Davison.⁶

Departing from such well-established arguments that associate the Gothic tradition with political fear, my dissertation recovers the Gothic as a literature of political possibility. I argue that Gothic novels challenge liberal ideas of the bounded self to produce a sometimes radically egalitarian politics of freedom in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Driving narratives of political fear in this

period was the concern that, in an age of revolution and emergent democracy, distinctions of rank and class were being challenged by new political systems emerging in France and the United States. Yet this was also a period of shifting scientific thought as debates about human variety challenged the biological categories of gender, race, and species that were just beginning to be established. In this project, I demonstrate how a transatlantic Gothic literature brought biological and political indistinction together so that the horrors of one commented on the terror of the other.⁷ However, this language of indistinction is also what Gothic authors used to describe the political promise of this period. I read taxonomists and politicians together, articulating the correlation between emergent biology and revolutionary democracy, to reconsider what these thinkers imagined as possible in both science and politics—and how the very imagination of those possibilities seemed both terrifying and liberating.

In arguing for a more liberatory and transatlantic reading of the Gothic, I align myself with the recently-published *Transnational Gothic*, in which Monika Elbert and Bridget M. Marshall claim that “the destabilizing quality of Gothic encounters, while threatening, have the potential to be quite liberating.”⁸ Elbert and Marshall argue compellingly that the “Gothic is a literature of freedom, above all, even if it involves a painful dialectic between possessed and dispossessed, which finally culminates in a vision of freedom—or at least of such liberating possibilities.”⁹ Yet whereas their utopian visions of the Gothic are tied almost exclusively to a political reading of freedom, my project also emphasizes a liberatory biology. In the following chapters I argue that Gothic challenges to the bounded liberal self are both political and biological in nature. Other critics have acknowledged the dialectic of fear and desire often present in the Gothic, but few scholars before Elbert and Marshall have teased out the affirmative politics of a revolutionary Gothic.

Histories of the Gothic often begin with Edmund Burke, and for good reason. As Joseph Crawford and others have recognized, Gothic rhetoric is “often articulated in terms of the Burkean sublime of terror,” and many Gothic chronologies open with Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757).¹⁰ Paulson notes that “it seems not possible to write about the Revolution and avoid the aesthetic categories first introduced by Burke in his *Reflections*,” while Davison similarly acknowledges the long shadow Burke casts on the aesthetic categories by which the French Revolution was understood—categories that frequently included Gothic imagery.¹¹ In the first of his *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1796), for example, Burke writes: “out of the tomb of the murdered monarchy in France has arisen a vast, tremendous, unformed spectre, in a far more terrifick guise than any which ever yet have overpowered the imagination, and subdued the fortitude of man.”¹² Here Burke’s reference to a politically-charged sublime spectre represents a Gothic terror of revolution that can overpower the human imagination. That terror manifests itself as a fear of formlessness that surfaces again and again in Burke’s political writings. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), for example, Burke is forced into choosing monarchy (which by 1796 has been “murdered”) over the shapeless and arbitrary power of revolutionaries. When faced with the political stakes of indistinction, Burke argues on behalf of forms, customs, and distinctions.

Indeed, one of Burke’s deepest concerns is that French revolutionaries have abandoned all historical and political precedents in setting up their government. Burke wrote explicitly in his *Reflections* that “the very idea of the fabrication of a new government, is enough to fill us with disgust and horror.”¹³ The language of monstrosity and horror is central to his descriptions throughout the text:

In viewing this monstrous tragic-comic scene, the most opposite passions necessarily succeed, and sometimes mix with each other in the mind; alternate contempt and indignation; alternate laughter and tears; alternate scorn and horror.¹⁴

Such language further demonstrates the political fear embedded in the Gothic rhetoric of this period. In addition, the rhetoric of mixture draws attention to Burke's fears of indistinction, as mixture violates the boundaries of social and political taxonomies.¹⁵ Burke continues to express a deep anxiety over lack of definitions and categories, fearing that France has become "a state of unbounded power, for undefined and undefinable purposes."¹⁶ In Burke's eyes, this indistinction leads humans to be little more than animals who "range without limit, and are diversified by infinite combinations in the wild and unbounded regions of the imagination."¹⁷ This reference to humans as animals demonstrates that, at least metaphorically, Burke saw violations of political distinctions as a violation of species boundaries. Being politically indistinct was comparable to being nonhuman (or less than human): in other words, being unclassifiable and unknowable—therefore terrifying.

In his earlier *Enquiry* we gain a better understanding of Burke's investment in political distinctions. The same anxieties and tensions that play out in Burke's *Enquiry*—anxieties that Adam Phillips refers to as "the infinite possibilities of human subjects and a complementary terror of endless confusion and uncertainty"—turn into a full-fledged obsession with maintaining forms and political distinctions in Burke's later political writings.¹⁸ Burke's interest in distinctions has been critically well-established by Gothic scholars. Paulson, for example, writes that:

Burke would have agreed that what the Revolution was all about, in its social dimension at least, was *difference*. Once it had achieved its first

aim of 'liberty,' its second aim (perhaps a consequence of the first) was to bring about the 'equality' of undifferentiation, which he predicted would produce uncurbable violence.¹⁹

Unlike Paulson, however, who also uses the language of undifferentiation to describe cycles of retaliation in the revolutionary Gothic, I turn to the language of indistinction to represent both Burke's fears of undifferentiation and the Gothic promise of indistinction as a form of freedom. While Burke certainly sees undifferentiation as productive of violence, he also struggles with the ways in which it might also be necessary to build a strong body politic. This leads us back to his aesthetic writings. Revolutionary writers adopted his language of the sublime for revolutionary discourse, and—as Furniss has argued—Burke struggled to resist that. He wanted to recast the French Revolution as a false sublime, or a paralyzing spectacle of terror. Yet in his own aesthetic writings, Burke also describes fear as having a productive function; it is not merely disabling. Moments of weakness or terror are like the exercising of muscles, according to Burke—they are conducive to both health and strength.²⁰ As such, survival is somewhat dependent on fears produced by the sublime. So, while his *Reflections* seek to paint the Gothic terror of revolution, his own aesthetic categories allow for a functional capacity to the sublime that is perhaps even enabling.

I begin with Burke because it is this tension between boundlessness and order presented in his aesthetic writings that provides a language of gothic sensibility for the authors I discuss—even as most of them at least partially reject his politics. This is most evident in Wollstonecraft (and, to some extent, Ann Radcliffe), who offers both a political and an aesthetic critique of Burke's understanding of the sublime and its relationship to revolutionary politics.²¹ In the *Reflections*, for example, Burke not only refers to "masculine women" (which upsets formal gender categories) but to "furies of

hell, in the abused shape of the vilest of women.”²² As Furniss notes: “It is not just that men may have *assumed* the garb of women, or even that women have taken on the attributes of men, but that it becomes no longer possible to tell the difference—no longer possible to assign a fixed gender to either of the revolutionary sexes.”²³ For Burke, gender indistinction is one marker of disruption of hierarchies and social systems—a marker Wollstonecraft attacks in her response.²⁴ This disrupts the social and cultural distinctions he sees as essential to maintaining political order, and also disrupts Burke’s own categories of the sublime and the beautiful (which are clearly gendered in his aesthetic writings). Here Burke’s aesthetic categories become clearly political. As Furniss writes, “Burke takes for granted the analogy between the human body and political state.”²⁵ This analogy matters, because Wollstonecraft uses biology to make political arguments about gender and indistinction—a move crafted specifically as a response to Burke’s writings.

Burke fears social and political indistinction, and it is important to recognize that he is writing in a period in which Europeans also expressed biological fears of indistinction—particularly in terms of the instability of species distinctions in America. Burke’s invocation of *Cato* in the aftermath of the French Revolution is a striking moment of this overlap between biological and political discourse in Europe and America. In a 1789 letter to Charles-Jean-Francois Depont, Burke writes, “the French may be yet to go through more transmigrations. They may pass, as one of our poets says, ‘through many varieties of untried being,’ before their state obtains its final form.”²⁶ The poet is Joseph Addison and the quoted phrase is from his play *Cato* (1712). Yet while Cato used the phrase “varieties of untried being” to think about metaphysics and the afterlife, Burke uses it to describe shifting political forms and systems following the French Revolution.²⁷ Burke sees these “transmigrations” as

chaotic, warning his friend to “fix rules” and establish a semblance of stability until the state reaches its final form. Formlessness and the lack of fixed distinctions in a period of revolutionary activity unsettle Burke, which explains the fierce advocacy of social and political distinctions in the *Reflections* and his later work.

Yet the passage Burke cites from Addison’s final act also invokes a language of biological indistinction: “Through what variety of untried being, / Through what new scenes and changes must we pass! / The wide, the unbounded prospect, lies before me.”²⁸ The language of *variety* in Addison’s “variety of untried being” offers a vocabulary for interrogating human exceptionalism in an early republic that looked out over its own “unbounded prospect” with concerns about mixture and hybridity. By the late eighteenth century, “variety” had become a politically and culturally charged term in debates over human diversity, with polygenists often using the word interchangeably with “species” and monogenists primarily using “variety” to indicate differences in degree rather than kind. In the second edition to *Systema Naturae* (1740), for example, Carolus Linnaeus divided the human species into six varieties, fueling a debate over race and human origins that continued into the nineteenth century and played a significant role in the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin.²⁹

Thomas Jefferson’s participation in this debate is notable; his response to Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon’s work in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) and his often-contradictory stance towards blacks demonstrate the centrality of such questions.³⁰ In the late-eighteenth century, a number of American writers—including both Jefferson and Brown—felt it necessary to respond to claims about American species made by natural historians such as Buffon and C. F. Volney.³¹ Beginning with Jefferson, and even earlier with Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), I argue that American Gothic fiction is often a critique of European claims that

Americans are mixed, prolific, and degenerate. It is in the context of these debates that theologians and natural philosophers explored human difference through science, politics, and religion. Such writings took on new significance in the aftermath of the French and Haitian revolutions as they became intertwined with increasingly heated debates about human diversity and human origins.

The crossroads of biology and politics becomes a nexus of the authors in this dissertation as they engage with broader questions about human life. Their politics are not framed strictly in the Burkean sense of a contract between the living and the dead (a source of debate between Burke and Thomas Paine), but also in terms of what counts as political life in an age of democratic revolutions. For example, if democratic man is a creature with rights inherent in him or her solely by the fact of being human and being alive, in the 1790s this endowment of life also makes him or her a matter of government. By imagining a reduction of man to mere animal life through leveling, the authors in this project seem to be questioning whether human life itself—life subject to biological and political indistinction—might be too weak a category to shape governments or social orders. If the human is as fluid and changeable as Stanhope Smith posits, how can it be expected to constitute stable political forms? Yet unlike Burke, the authors in this project attempt to view this instability as promising—an opportunity to look beyond the human toward new forms of freedom.

While the primary authors highlighted in this dissertation—Mary Wollstonecraft, Charles Brockden Brown, Mary Shelley, and Robert Montgomery Bird—are not the first to grapple with species difference and human indistinction, the utopian potential of mixture and transformation takes on a new political resonance in their texts. These authors were versed in the scientific writings of figures like Samuel Stanhope Smith, Erasmus Darwin, and Samuel Morton, as well as the political writings circulating

across the Atlantic. They responded by crafting a Gothic fiction that explored the potential consequences of radical leveling and responded to a Burkean politics of distinction by instead exploring the liberatory promise of indistinction in their writings—often drawing on Burke’s own aesthetics of the sublime to shape an emergent transatlantic Gothic sensibility.³² Drawing on this work, I demonstrate how questions about the stability of the human as a political category became questions about the stability of the human as a biological category as these authors imagined a world that was already effectively posthuman. Gothic literature thus represents an important arena for constructing a politics of indistinction, and I selected those Gothic narratives of indistinction that most clearly examine the biological (sleepwalking, plague, species, reanimation, and psychology) to think about the political (democracy, revolution, boundlessness, and equality) and vice versa. These texts reveal an intense engagement with early nineteenth-century constructions of the human and the self, and serve as laboratory for experimenting with the fears and hopes of indistinction.

No writer more explicitly responds to Burke, nor engages with the promise of indistinction as optimistically as Mary Wollstonecraft. Through the lens of Samuel Stanhope Smith’s *An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species* (1788), which I discuss at length in Chapter 1, Wollstonecraft’s political treatises and engagement with Burke suggest how pervasive the intertwined questions of human distinction and political history became in an age of democratic revolutions. Whereas figures such as Burke and John Adams (among others) attempted to theorize a politics of distinction amidst democratic revolutions by arguing for human distinctions as political and historical necessities, Wollstonecraft turns to biology and the natural sciences to theorize a politics of indistinction that, while still commenting on the political conflicts and controversies of this period, is rooted in a

parallel debate in the sciences over human plasticity and variation. This matters because both of these debates have too long been rooted in the narratives of political or biological degeneracy, and have for too long been treated themselves as distinct. Wollstonecraft—and other authors in this project—upend those narratives by thinking about indistinction as productive. Wollstonecraft argues that Burke’s affections for heredity, nobility, customs make nobility into nothing more than “monsters in human shape,” and asks: “How can he discover that he is a man, when all his wants are instantly supplied, and invention is never sharpened by necessity?”³³ In *Rights of Woman* (1798), Wollstonecraft dedicates an entire chapter to the “pernicious effects which arise from the unnatural distinctions established in society,” building upon these claims.³⁴ Wollstonecraft inverts the Gothic rhetoric of Burke, making distinctions themselves unnatural and monstrous. Harkening back to a tradition of Longinus where the sublime is tied to political liberty, Wollstonecraft sees indistinction (and particularly gender indistinction) as natural and politically liberatory.

As an interdisciplinary project interested in boundlessness, it should come as no surprise that my dissertation has its own boundary issues. Yet these issues have profound methodological and literary-historical implications. Stretching from the 1780s to the 1840s, my project is situated along a historical fault line in American literary studies (early American vs. nineteenth-century American) while also crossing the geographical and national boundaries between American and British literature.³⁵ I have framed my dissertation as a transatlantic project because revolutionary discourse is transatlantic, and because the Gothic is a transatlantic genre.³⁶ Like them, I also resist the ways in which scholarship on the Gothic has been limited by national borders—although the scope of my project still limits me to a study of British and American fiction. This scope, however, allows me to produce a more coherent

transatlantic literary history than scholars of the Gothic have acknowledged.³⁷ To do this effectively, I also work across disciplinary boundaries. In this project, I engage with literature and history, political theory, science studies, and philosophy. The result of these boundary crossings is a project that rethinks a Gothic literary tradition following the “age of democratic revolutions” in order to accommodate convergent political and scientific narratives centered on the contested figure of the human.

By tracing a transatlantic literary history that begins with Mary Wollstonecraft, I purposefully deemphasize the influence of William Godwin on these authors—many of whom are often labeled Godwinian—to better understand Wollstonecraft’s influence on the Gothic sensibility of this period.³⁸ I similarly dislocate traditional narratives of an “American” Gothic that often jump straight from Brown to Edgar Allan Poe. The landscape of existing scholarship on Wollstonecraft, Brown, Shelley, and Bird rarely engages with their transatlantic literary-historical influences. Both Brown and Shelley, for example, were influenced by Wollstonecraft. Brown’s first novel, *Alcuin: A Dialogue* (1798), was an attempt to write an American version of Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Woman*. Shelley read Brown’s novels and admired them (even referencing Brown in her 1826 novel, *The Last Man*); Bird, on the other hand, despised Brown’s work—even as he modeled his own writings on Brown and even repurposed some of Brown’s material outright. All of these authors read and responded (directly or indirectly) to Burke. Yet few scholars have examined them together, and those who work on them individually often mistakenly diagnose a conservative postrevolutionary turn in their politics. In this dissertation, I look to remedy that by articulating a more radical politics of indistinction and proposing an alternative literary trajectory for understanding the historical and political continuities of the transatlantic Gothic in this period.

It is the transatlantic dimension of my project that allowed me to discover the Gothic as a politics of possibility. The translation of British Gothic into American Gothic and Brown's revision of European suspicions of American species are what open up indistinction as a politically liberatory concept, just as the confluence of political and biological narratives also make the Gothic a genre of utopian promise. In *Edgar Huntly* (1799), for example, Brown embeds a European Gothic narrative within his American tale, allowing us to think carefully about the Gothic as a transatlantic mode—one that travels with Clithero from England to America. By depicting Clithero as a shapeshifter when he arrives in America, Brown represents the move from a European Gothic to an American Gothic not merely as a geographical shift that marks a move from castles to frontier fiction, but as a shift from the Gothic as a breakdown of distinctions of rank and class (Clithero's narrative) to the Gothic as an enabling space of ontological indistinction (Edgar's narrative) that redeems America from European suspicions of degeneracy. Edgar's narrative produces an ontological framework that opens up fluid human-animal possibilities that aren't strictly incorporated within a dominant cultural mode or a monstrous otherness, as I argue more fully in Chapter 2. Instead, my reading of these narratives highlights how indistinction always has been central to Gothic writing, and how these fictions produce not only a dialectic of fear and desire, but a landscape of political possibility. It is for this reason that I turn to posthumanist methodologies as a way of reading monstrosity as something more than a terrifying otherness—what Judith Halberstam refers to as a deviant status—but rather the utopian promise of posthumanity.

Posthumanism, animal studies, and biopolitics have become important modes of inquiry in contemporary Americanist scholarship, and a similar turn to the intersection of life sciences and politics in the early Atlantic world is necessary in

order to understand how the Gothic engages with and challenges liberal ideas of the human self.³⁹ Novelists and scientists throughout the Atlantic world sought to construct narratives that could address questions of natural variety, human diversity, dynamic change, community, and the self—questions that are also deeply political.⁴⁰ This project examines how these writers organized their reality around figures of ambiguity and paradox (particularly as they explored what it meant to be human), while seeking more complex and less anthropocentric narratives that resisted binary systems of understanding the human and the natural world.⁴¹ For this project, the work of Donna Haraway has been particularly important. While Haraway’s greatest impact on literary and culture studies has been her feminist writings—most popularly “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1985)—in this project I have been drawn to her other work on reclaiming monsters as regenerative figures and the idea of companion species.⁴² I see Haraway as a natural successor to Mary Wollstonecraft; she is an intellectual who draws on biological arguments to produce feminist challenges to hierarchies and the politics of distinction I have laid out in this introduction. Reading Haraway today, it seems clear that her work represents an ongoing response to Burke—her insistence on a politics for “inappropriate/d others” who are “not to be originally fixed by difference” is itself a politics of indistinction.⁴³ More importantly, perhaps, she offers an affirmative model for thinking through what a politics of indistinction might look like, and how such a politics opens up new possibilities for reading the Gothic as a literature of possibility. Her work makes it possible to reexamine how scholars read the postcolonial “other” (what she calls a reification based on difference), and to build a less anthropocentric method for thinking about literary and culture studies. The work of Haraway in producing a more liberatory and affirmative politics of

posthumanism maps nicely onto my view of the revolutionary Gothic as an affirmative political genre tied to—but not strictly defined by—a poetics of terror.

By articulating a politics of indistinction I highlight what early Americanists (and those working more broadly in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic world) can contribute to conversations about posthumanism and what posthumanist theory adds to existing early Americanist scholarship.⁴⁴ I see these as mutually supportive conversations that do not often meet. Just as Matthew Taylor does the important work of rethinking posthumanism as something that predates the twentieth century (beginning with Poe), my project carves out a space for the posthuman in the transatlantic Gothic fiction of the late-eighteenth century leading up to Poe. Yet even as his work rethinks the place of the human and the self alongside the cosmologies of late-nineteenth century (importantly recognizing the role of African-American literature in this process), my project recognizes a different set of challenges to the human that exist in the revolutionary and post-revolutionary Atlantic, where emergent democracies and proto-evolutionary thought force a recalibration of the political and biological distinctions that previously defined bodies and bodies politic. Cary Wolfe has noted that posthumanism is both before and after humanism, so this longer trajectory should seem obvious.⁴⁵ Still, with the bulk of posthumanist work taking place in the twentieth century, the work of my dissertation to recognize posthumanity as a much earlier concern helps us understand that these are not strictly modern questions.

With that in mind, my dissertation opens with Wollstonecraft's review of Smith's *An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species* (1788) as evidence of the overlap between biological and political discourse and as an entry point for thinking more carefully about the critical role Wollstonecraft plays in shaping a transatlantic Gothic sensibility. I use Smith's *Essay* to establish the politics

of indistinction as a transatlantic concern and to show how America becomes a crucial space for negotiating the political and biological consequences of equality. I also invoke his writings as evidence of Wollstonecraft's engagement with science as foundational to her political theories—particularly her investment in biological justifications for gender indistinction. Wollstonecraft's turn to biology also shapes her response to Burke's depictions of the sublime and the beautiful, an act that itself is deeply political. I argue that Wollstonecraft ultimately harkens back to an earlier version of the sublime—one that begins with Longinus—as something that can only flourish in places where equality is valued. Wollstonecraft's engagement with the intersections of the biological and the political shape her Gothic sensibility and set up my later chapters on Brown, Shelley, and Bird, whose Gothic narratives further establish the sublime as something that does more than threateningly erode boundaries. Instead, these authors envision the sublime as something more promising, something that enables the type of boundary-crossings capable of producing radical equality.

The remaining chapters examine the political evolution of this Gothic sensibility as it plays out into the nineteenth century. My second chapter, on Brown, uses three of his major novels—*Arthur Mervyn* (1799-1800), *Ormond* (1799), and *Edgar Huntly* (1799)—to trace the move from gender indistinction in Wollstonecraft's writing to race and species indistinction in an emergent American Gothic fiction. I specifically examine how Brown challenges the idea of human exceptionalism by exploring the leveling effect of epidemics and the breakdown of human-animal distinctions in the American wilderness. By recoding immunity as a state of political exception and sleepwalking as a process of species mixture, Brown interrogates both the sustainability of political life in a democratic society and the utopian potential of human indistinction. This chapter offers an expanded reading of Brown's novels in

which lycanthropic transformations and imagined immunities allow him to craft a transatlantic Gothic fiction invested in ontological indistinction.

Locating Brown within a larger transatlantic discourse motivates the move to Shelley in my third chapter. In *The Last Man* (1826), Shelley presents a new narrative of indistinction that moves beyond liberatory human-animal transformations to explore the posthuman prospects of human extinction. Whereas Brown destabilizes the category of the human through tropes of somnambulism, lycanthropy, and narratives of immunity, with Shelley one gets the sense that all political systems are ultimately rendered indistinct against the leveling power of disease.⁴⁶ Scholars have primarily read *The Last Man* as Shelley's claim for racial unity and domestic intimacy, yet in this chapter I argue that such readings miss underlying political claims about human indistinction. Shelley challenges not only the boundaries of human communities, but the boundaries of the human as both a biological and a historical category. By opening up a historical boundlessness and entertaining the possibility of human reanimation (a trope also present in her 1818 novel, *Frankenstein*), Shelley challenges the sustainability of political distinctions over time. In this chapter, I argue that this speculative historical imagination makes indistinction central to Shelley's vision of the potentially utopian ends of human history.

In my fourth chapter I turn to Bird, whose *Sheppard Lee* (1836) shifts us away from Shelley's narratives of reanimation to a narratives of metempsychosis that raises the possibility of an indistinct self. Bird was familiar with contemporary scientific and historical debates about racial origins, and while he takes up similar issues as Shelley, he uses them instead to examine the psychological state of nineteenth-century American politics. The permeable boundaries between persons—and even between persons and things—raise questions about how the indistinct self points to the

mutability of political categories, including the slave/master distinction so actively debated in antebellum America. The transmigration of soul from body to body in *Sheppard Lee* complicates social, political, and biological distinctions and leads to a politics of indistinction in which the bounded self becomes permeable and leads (potentially) to madness. Yet this madness is liberatory for Sheppard Lee, allowing him to engage in radical cross-racial and cross-species sympathies that will continue to influence political, scientific, and literary inquiries into the nineteenth century.

NOTES

¹ The fluidity of the Gothic has been noted by Marilyn Michaud: “The initial task of scholarship devoted to the Gothic is often an attempt at definition: what is Gothic? Typically, the discussion will begin with an exploration of the relationship between the nascent British form and its various progenitors followed by the inevitable conclusion that the term is ‘fluid’, ‘troublesome’ and ‘mutable.’” See Michaud, *Republicanism and the American Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), 1. Other scholars have noted that critical interest in the Gothic was reinvigorated with the publication of David Punter’s *Literature of Terror* (1980). Ellen Malenas Ledoux makes this claim in *Social Reform in Gothic Writing: Fantastic Forms of Change, 1764-1834* (2013).

² Eric Savoy, “The Face of the Tennant: A Theory of American Gothic,” in *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative*, ed. Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy (Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1998), 3.

³ Angela Wright, *Britain, France and the Gothic, 1764-1820: The Import of Terror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 15. This also holds true for an emergent American Gothic. Michaud argues, for example, that Gothic language is tied to republicanism: “American Gothic takes the conceptual language of republicanism to nightmarish extremes. Engaging the political lexicon of corruption, tyranny and degeneration, it recounts for each American generation a new apocalyptic mood.” See Michaud, 176. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock similarly describes the American Gothic as tied up in political fear and deeply informed by “Americans swept up in panics over the figurative pestilence of radical ideology.” See Weinstock, *Charles Brockden Brown* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 29. Teresa A. Goddu has also argued that “the [American] gothic disrupts the dream world of national myth with the nightmares of history. See Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 10.

⁴ Marquis de Sade, “Reflections on the Novel” (1800), in *The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings*, ed. Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 109.

⁵ Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution (1789-1820)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 227. Paulson argues that he doesn’t have “any doubt that the popularity of gothic fiction in the 1790s and well into the nineteenth century was due in part to the widespread anxieties and fears in Europe aroused by the turmoil in France finding a kind of sublimation or catharsis in tales of darkness, confusion, blood, and horror”—a sentiment that echoes Sade’s reading of the period, 220-221.

⁶ See Fred Botting, *Gothic* (2013); Teresa A. Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (1997); and Carol Margaret Davison, *History of the Gothic: Gothic Literature, 1764-1824* (2009).

⁷ While, on a basic level, indistinction is the absence of qualities or features (such as rank or class) that set something apart, in this project I also emphasize indistinction as an ontology that suspends differentiation between forms and beings (particularly gender, race, and species). Biological indistinction—in particular, the inability to clearly separate one species from another—held consequences for political indistinction: the inability to delineate one class from another.

⁸ Bridget M. Marshall and Monika Elbert, “Introduction,” in *Transnational Gothic: Literary and Social Exchanges in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Monika Elbert and Bridget M. Marshall (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 8.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Joseph Crawford, *Gothic Fiction and the Invention of Terrorism: The Politics and Aesthetics of Fear in the Age of the Reign of Terror* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), viii. See also, for example, the chronology presented in *The Gothic*, an anthology edited by David Punter and Glennis Byron (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), xi.

¹¹ Davison, *History of the Gothic*, 246. Davison has written at some length on the Gothic nature of Burke’s political writings in a chapter on the revolutionary Gothic: “Burke’s lengthy and graphic description of [the French Revolution] is extremely Gothic in nature, suggesting an undead creature that has been dangerously rejuvenated, albeit unwittingly. In what may be the most intriguing passage in *Reflections* . . .

Burke argues that, under the guise of constructing a rational body politic, the French revolutionaries have created a monstrous body that lacks external controls and heeds no established laws,” 120.

¹² Edmund Burke, “Letters on a Regicide Peace,” in *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (London: Bohn, 1862), 8:82.

¹³ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O’Brien (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 117.

¹⁴ Ibid., 92. This mixture might be useful in helping to distinguish between a tradition of the sublime coming out of Longinus and the sublime Burke crafts in his *Reflections*. Longinus argues that the hyperbaton represents a useful form of mixture—one that most closely mirrors the “inward workings of nature.” Longinus, *On Great Writing (On the Sublime)*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1991), 103. Although Wollstonecraft clearly draws on Burke’s own language of the sublime and the beautiful in her response to *Reflections*, it is also possible that she (along with the other authors in this project) are also drawing on an older tradition coming out of Longinus that associates the sublime with political liberty.

¹⁵ Ibid., 14. In addition to a language of mixture, Burke also describes France in terms of dissolution, writing of “the portentous state of France—where the Elements which compose Human Society seem all to be dissolved, and a world of Monsters to be produc’d in the place of it.”

¹⁶ Ibid., 134.

¹⁷ Ibid., 201.

¹⁸ Adam Phillips, “Introduction,” in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), xii. Phillips refers to the *Enquiry* as representing Burke’s “always paradoxical search for confining formulations”—emphasizing Burke’s investment in boundaries, xii.

¹⁹ Paulson, *Representations of Revolution*, 235-236. In referring to undifferentiation, Paulson is drawing on an already-established aesthetic language used in describing the grotesque. For this project, however, I have chosen to use indistinction (although the two terms are very similar) because that word is part of a contemporary critical discourse in posthumanism and animal studies. My use of the term allows me to engage scholarly conversations that include Giorgio Agamben, Donna Haraway, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze, among others.

²⁰ See Tom Furniss, *Edmund Burke’s Aesthetic Ideology: Language, Gender, and Political Economy in Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Furniss makes the following claim: “Although pain and fear are dangerous for the weak—those who become trapped in the sublime’s second phase—they may also work to tone up mind and body,” 27.

²¹ For examples of this critique of Ann Radcliffe, see Wolfram Schmidgen, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Law of Property* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 150-185.

²² Burke, *Reflections*, 165.

²³ Furniss, *Aesthetic Ideology*, 172.

²⁴ Wollstonecraft challenges Burke’s categories by claiming that his own “feverish eccentricities” fall short of the sublime, for “truly sublime is the character that acts from principle, and governs the inferior springs of activity without slackening their vigour.” Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, in a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (1790), in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1989), 5:8.

²⁵ Furniss, 38.

²⁶ Edmund Burke, *Further Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Daniel E. Ritchie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1992), 12-13. The full passage from Burke’s letter reads: “You are now to live in a new order of things, under a plan of government of which no man can speak from experience. Your talents, your

public spirit, and your fortune, give you fair pretensions to a considerable share in it. Your settlement may be at hand; but that it is still at some distance, is more likely. The French may be yet to go through more transmigrations. They may pass, as one of our poets says, ‘through many varieties of untried being,’ before their state obtains its final form. In that progress through chaos and darkness, you will find it necessary (at all times it is more or less so) to fix rules to keep your life and conduct in some steady course,” 12-13.

²⁷ It is, however, worth noting that Burke also uses biological metaphors to make his case for distinctions. In a rather infamous passage he writes: “On this scheme of things, a king is but a man; a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal; and an animal not of the highest order.” Burke, *Reflections*, 171. Burke’s fear of indistinction is often manifested through this language of taxonomy. He also uses similar language, drawing on the great chain of being, to talk about the lack of generational continuity if things become this fluid—socially and politically, 193.

²⁸ Joseph Addison, *Cato: A Tragedy and Selected Essays*, ed. Christine Dunne Henderson and Mark E. Yellin (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004), 88.

²⁹ See Adrian Desmond and James Moore, *Darwin’s Sacred Cause: How a Hatred of Slavery Shaped Darwin’s Views on Human Evolution* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009).

³⁰ See Bruce Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003). Jefferson’s complex engagement with race and natural history are treated extensively by Dain in this opening chapter, which includes a reading of the language of “variety” in Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

³¹ Both Jefferson and Brown challenge what they see as the diminutive or degenerate view of American species and climates depicted in the writings of Buffon and Volney. See Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. Frank Shuffleton (New York: Penguin, 1998) and C. F. Volney, *A View of the Soil and Climate of the United States of America*, trans. Charles Brockden Brown (New York: Hafner Publishing, 1968).

³² Although readings of the Gothic as political fear often begin with Burke, it is important to recognize that a competing rhetoric—equally Gothic—emerges in the writings of figures like Richard Price (who Burke was responding to) and Wollstonecraft (who was responding to Burke). Both Price and Wollstonecraft draw on a Burkean aesthetics of the sublime and the beautiful to make liberatory arguments. That being said, the strongest connection between liberty and the sublime still emerges from within a different tradition that begins with Longinus. In this project, I argue that Wollstonecraft and others are hearkening to an older tradition of thought, one that sees the sublime attached to republican politics.

³³ Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 5:42.

³⁴ Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792), in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1989), 5:211.

³⁵ My turn to the Atlantic as a transnational category is—in part—an attempt to address the perceived cultural and scientific gap between Britain and the Americas in current literary and historical scholarship. Despite the rise of American studies and the canonization of “early American literature” as a legitimate field of inquiry, scholars continue to view American letters as derivative and “non-literary.” Susan Scott Parrish, among other early American scholars, has noted that British America “was not necessarily exceptional as an inventor of representative government or republicanism [...]; rather, it was exceptional as a meeting place or battleground for once distant peoples, microbes, plants, and animals that produced a strange new world for all.” Parrish, *American Curiosity: Cultures of Natural History in the Colonial British Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 7. The cultural lag between Britain and the Americas has often been noted, as news may be old and culturally irrelevant by the time it enters conversation. Yet within the discourse of natural history I argue this lag is perhaps not as significant as we’ve thought. It is important to recognize that the Americas were a key site of knowledge production rather than recipients of English thought coming out of the Royal Society. The dialogue between Britain and British America lagged, but it lagged both ways. The American “laboratory” was stocked with exhibits unavailable to naturalists in England and Europe, and peoples unavailable to anthropologists elsewhere. I take seriously Parrish’s efforts to revisit “the critical importance of the

Americas in shaping Enlightenment methods and systems” and recognize America’s role in “the birth of science as predicated upon a heterocosm of specimens and people,” 15. Transnational geographies enable my project to demonstrate the need for alternative literary histories that look to the scientific and philosophical exchanges across the Atlantic.

³⁶ Contemporary scholarship has demonstrated that the Atlantic world cannot be considered an organic whole. Even as I examine its biopolitical underpinnings, I recognize that the Atlantic remains primarily a political category. I appreciate Paul Gilroy’s work on the Atlantic as a category animated by “inescapable hybridity and intermixture of ideas” and a history that “yields a course of lessons as to the instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, always being remade.” Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), xi. Yet Brian Connolly also asks an important question: “Are the hybrid, transnational figures created by the Atlantic world inevitably disruptive, simply because they cannot be reduced to stable racial categories or contained within the boundaries of the nation?” Connolly, “Intimate Atlantics: Toward a Critical History of Transnational Early America,” in *Common-place: The Interactive Journal of Early American Life* 11.2 (2011). I find both Gilroy and Connolly compelling in their theorizing of the Atlantic world, and recognize that if we turn to the transnational as a critical frame that exposes the fragility of the nation, we must also recognize the fragility of the transnational. Transnational scholarship cannot simply be an act of deconstructing boundaries.

³⁷ Unlike Elbert and Marshall, I resist the influence of Judith Halberstam’s work on literary histories of the Gothic. Halberstam argues that monstrosity emerged in the nineteenth century and claims that, while “there are connections to be made between these [eighteenth-century] stories of mad monks, haunted castles, and wicked foreigners and the nineteenth-century Gothic tales of monsters and vampires, we should not take the connections too far.” Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 3. Although most histories of the Gothic begin with Gothic romances of the eighteenth century, this claim by Halberstam still haunts contemporary scholarship. I push back against this tendency by arguing instead that the connections between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic fiction deserve greater attention. In later chapters I demonstrate how indistinction becomes central to identifying these connections.

³⁸ In this I have been influenced by Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro, who make this argument in their introductions to novels by Charles Brockden Brown: “We use the term Woldwinite to highlight, through an abbreviation of Wollstonecraft and Godwin, this group’s special place among the British radical democrats of the 1790s. The term ‘Godwinians’ erases the crucial role of Wollstonecraft and other women in this group, a role that was particularly important for Brown and many other writers.” See Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland; or, the Transformation, with Related Texts*, ed. Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2009), xviii.

³⁹ Matthew Taylor is one of the first to thoroughly examine how posthumanist theory might illuminate nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American literary scholarship. See Taylor, *Universes Without Us: Posthuman Cosmologies in American Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013). Whereas Taylor opens with Poe, my project engages with posthumanist theory in the literary-historical period directly preceding Poe and his contemporaries.

⁴⁰ I recognize that the term “scientist” was not used professionally until the nineteenth century. Here I am using the label to designate taxonomists, physicians, botanists, philosophers, and other thinkers whose work was slowly being institutionalized under the heading of science in this period.

⁴¹ This turn to posthumanist methodologies provides tools for asking what ontologies and life processes are assumed to be socially relevant in the early Atlantic world—and what alternatives are devalued or marginalized as a result. How does one define individual and collective life/health, and who determines what lives are worthy or not worthy of being lived? How are humans seen as superior or inferior races, strong or weak sexes, rising or degenerate cultures? How do subjects adopt or modify scientific interpretations of life? How do they conceive of themselves as humans, animals, or other organisms? By placing these questions at the center of my project, I destabilize apparently natural or self-evident modes of scholarly practice and thought in order to develop new vocabularies of being and relation.

⁴² See Haraway, “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others,” in *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004) and *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

⁴³ Haraway, "Promises of Monsters," 69.

⁴⁴ Posthumanism has emerged—often in conjunction with animal studies—as a new framework for understanding both the humanities and the human, although it has not emerged without skepticism and it has received scant attention outside of twentieth and twenty-first century scholarship. Posthumanist thinkers, such as Donna Haraway, Isabelle Stengers, and Cary Wolfe, have called for undoing human-animal dichotomies and breaking apart the notion that humans are, or ever were, human. Yet other scholars, such as Priscilla Wald and David Eng, have been resistant to the use of the term "posthuman" because they argue that there is nothing "post-" about categories (the human and/or humanism) that we still don't fully understand.

⁴⁵ Wolfe argues compellingly that "[posthumanism] comes both before and after humanism: before in the sense that it names the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being . . . [but] it comes after in the sense that posthumanism names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore, a historical development that points toward the necessity of new theoretical paradigms (but also thrusts them upon us), a new mode of thought that comes after the cultural repressions and fantasies, the philosophical protocols and evasions, of humanism as a historically specific phenomenon." Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xv-xvi.

⁴⁶ That all of the Gothic authors in this project engage on some level with illness highlights a particular Gothic mode that emerges out of the politics of indistinction seen here in the writings of Smith and Wollstonecraft. The Gothic horror of these narratives lies in the exigencies of the unknown, the unknowable, the indistinct; they all draw on an indistinction that emerges as biological and political construct—one that is tied to emergent democratic revolutions. The physical and metaphorical power of disease opens up the possibility of human mutability and political leveling. There is a countenancing of the sublime that occurs when illness breaks down not only social and political distinctions, but also the distinctions that separate the human from the animal, the human from the nonhuman, male from female, life from death, and sanity from madness. The disintegration of life (biological or political) takes the form of illness in all of these narratives, offering a distinctly (or indistinctly) democratic sublime. In all of the texts I consider in this project there appear uncertainties and fears about the status of the human; as such, the authors all become uncertain diagnosticians of the cultural and political future of radical equality in the Atlantic world.

CHAPTER 1

“HUMAN PLASTICITY”

Mary Wollstonecraft, known for her critical reviews, began her foray into reviewing scientific texts for the *Analytical Review* with a rare moment of effusive praise. In 1788, she reviewed *An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species* (1788) by Samuel Stanhope Smith: a Pennsylvania-born clergyman and president of the College of New Jersey, as well as a prominent American acolyte of Scottish “Common Sense” philosophy. This marked Wollstonecraft’s first known review of a scientific text, and remained one of the longest reviews she would write for Joseph Johnson’s publication.¹ What sets this review apart from others by Wollstonecraft, however, is not merely its subject and length, but its tone; her review of Smith’s *Essay* is remarkably positive.² It opens with a lengthy meditation on the unity of the human species by Wollstonecraft, followed by claims that this is “an ingenious essay” and that Stanhope Smith provides “a masterly and philosophic answer” to the views of Lord Kames, who contended that different races of men were suited to different climates, an argument that placed him perilously close to theories of polygenism.³ Wollstonecraft highlights her key interest in Smith’s text by noting, “Dr. S. rationally concludes that natural causes are sufficiently powerful to effect the changes observable in the human species.” She then offers an unreserved recommendation: “Our succinct account will only, we imagine, excite curiosity and induce the thinker to peruse the whole performance.”⁴ She quotes liberally from the *Essay*, referring to it as “just,” “interesting,” full of “common-sense,” and having “great force”—then concludes by “expressing the pleasure the perusal has afforded us.”⁵ Wollstonecraft’s review demonstrates her conversance with Enlightenment discourses of race and her investment in the political implications of monogenetic narratives, as

well as her fascination with such questions.⁶ This “interesting subject,” she claims, is “of the utmost importance to our happiness.”⁷

The “interesting subject” of Smith’s *Essay* is nothing less than the question of human variety. Smith frames his essay as a response to what he calls the “arbitrary hypothesis, that men are originally sprung from different stocks, and are therefore divided by nature into different species,” arguing instead that human variation is the result of two primary natural causes: the climate and the state of society.⁸ The publication date of Smith’s essay places him at the center of scientific debates on race and theological debates about human origins, and situates him firmly on the side of monogenism.⁹ Although he primarily viewed his essay as a scientific and theological argument against polygenism, by the time he revised it in 1810 he was more keenly aware of its political implications.¹⁰ As I argue later in the chapter, this is one reason why Wollstonecraft matters: she draws out the political stakes of what Smith primarily sees as a scientific and theological argument.¹¹

Smith was no minor figure in the United States; he was a respected Presbyterian clergyman and member of the American Philosophical Society. One year after being published in Philadelphia, Smith’s *Essay* was revised and published in Edinburgh. The first edition was also republished in London in 1789.¹² As Winthrop D. Jordan notes in his introduction to the 1812 edition of Smith’s *Essay*, while “[his] book scarcely took England by storm . . . it was accepted as an outstanding presentation of the argument that human variations were caused by the environment.” More importantly, “anyone wishing to argue otherwise would have to contend against Smith.”¹³ By situating his text within a transatlantic discourse about equality, I emphasize the biological underpinnings of democratic thought in this period. While it would be a mistake to read his essay as a manifesto for human equality (Smith

publicly opposed radical democracy of the Jeffersonian variety), we shouldn't ignore how this discourse of equality subtends his work. Smith's *Essay* was written in postrevolutionary America, where the experiment with democracy highlights important tensions between essentializing narratives of human distinction (slavery and the Atlantic slave trade) and human likeness ("all men are created equal").

What motivated Wollstonecraft, known primarily for her contributions to political and literary writing, to compose such a lengthy and complimentary review of a scientific essay on human variation?¹⁴ In this chapter, I address that question by examining the ways in which Wollstonecraft's engagement with Smith and the debates over human distinction shape the way politics and biology align in her best-known political writings.¹⁵ Her penchant for using the language of biology to make political and historical claims—particularly when these claims draw upon a Galenic model of medical practice—exemplifies an emergent dynamic of this period that led many intellectuals to either defend or reject radical equality on scientific grounds. Although Wollstonecraft's interest in scientific texts has been noted by other scholars, scant work has been done on her extrapolation of scientific discourse into social and political realms.¹⁶ In what follows, I demonstrate how the biological underpinnings of her belief in mutability allowed Wollstonecraft to transform a transatlantic discourse about radical equality—which, as I discuss in my introduction, is often defined in response to Edmund Burke—into a politics of human plasticity.

The outcomes of this investigation will be threefold. First, scholars interested in race, politics, science, and religion do not always realize how much these topics impinged on one another. Even when we do understand that they all informed each other, it is difficult to examine these separate topics as mutually constitutive. Smith's *Essay* gives us a way into seeing these relations. This chapter draws together these

disparate topics by first establishing the politics of indistinction as a transatlantic discourse involved in race, politics, science, and religion. Moreover, Smith's influence and standing—along with the tensions he engaged over the period he spent revising and re-issuing his *Essay*—help situate America as a crucial space for negotiating both the political and biological consequences of equality and plasticity. Second, having established how a transatlantic discourse of human variety draws together these sometimes separated topics, this chapter establishes Wollstonecraft's engagement with science as foundational to her political theories—particularly her responses to Burke and his conceptualization of the French Revolution. Finally, this chapter will examine how Wollstonecraft's turn to biology as an argument for gender indistinction shapes her response to Burke's theory of the sublime and the beautiful, a move that itself is deeply political. By dissociating the sublime from masculinity, Wollstonecraft harkens back to an earlier version of the sublime—beginning with Longinus—as something that can only flourish in places where equality is valued. In this way, Wollstonecraft's engagement with the intersections of the biological and the political shape her Gothic sensibility and set up my later chapters on Charles Brockden Brown, Mary Shelley, and Robert Montgomery Bird, whose Gothic narratives similarly establish the sublime as something that does more than threateningly erode boundaries. Instead, these narratives envision the sublime as something that enables political and biological indistinctions capable of producing radical equality.

SAMUEL STANHOPE SMITH AND THE SCIENCE OF UNIVERSAL HUMANITY

Smith was an influential thinker in his own right. He was such a distinguished student at the College of New Jersey, for example, that James Madison once told his father Smith was “the greatest *Scholar*” of his class.¹⁷ Although his father at one point

worried about his growing interest in immaterialism and the work of Bishop Berkeley during his studies, Smith was thoroughly converted to the Scottish philosophy of “Common Sense” by his mentor and predecessor as president of the College of New Jersey, John Witherspoon. Key to this Enlightenment philosophy and Smith’s personal beliefs was the idea of a universal moral sense. His correspondence with these figures and his faith in “Common Sense” reveals him as a disciple of the Enlightenment—a man committed to human improvement through scientific inquiry and reason.

Like many of his colleagues at the College of New Jersey, Smith himself spoke widely on behalf of American independence. He also actively rejected dogmatic intolerance, at one point petitioning the Virginia assembly for the same religious liberties at home that the colony sought from Great Britain prior to the war. Smith advocated for more religiously catholic government and educational systems, particularly early in his life. He felt that names, labels, and sectarian arguments were limiting and narrow-minded; such proclivities already hint at an interest in indistinction. This anti-sectarian resistance to names and labels demonstrate a predisposition in Smith—an attitude that is interested in leveling and skeptical of fixed taxonomies. In his private correspondence, Smith believed in universal salvation, something he only acknowledged to friends such as Benjamin Rush via private correspondence. As such, he was theologically more radical than his peers, even as he clung to more moderate political positions later in life. He was a staunch Federalist, and—far from being considered theologically radical—he was sometimes accused of orthodoxy in his religious practice. This latter claim, however, was hard to reconcile with his tumultuous tenure as president of the College of New Jersey.¹⁸

While Smith was primarily regarded as a theologian prior to publishing his *Essay*, he was also an established educator (having helped found what we know today

as Washington and Lee University and Hampden-Sydney College) and natural philosopher. Smith conversed with many of the major American political figures of the period, including Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, with whom he discussed such issues as education, religious liberty, free will, sectarianism, and determinism. As Mark Noll notes, when Smith returned to the College of New Jersey as Professor of Moral Philosophy, he “became a leader . . . in the effort to defend the harmonies of physical science (or natural philosophy), mental science (or moral philosophy), theological science (systematic reflection on Christianity), and political science (the lineaments of republicanism).”¹⁹ His frequent correspondence with Rush and other members of the American Philosophical Society kept him abreast of developments (at home and abroad) in medicine, natural history, politics, education, and other fields. In all his work, Smith emphasized the harmony of subjects and, in various ways, sought to break down distinctions—distinctions which, it should be noted, often continue to guide our scholarship today. Scholars of early American literature, for instance, might specialize in the study of early American religion or early American science or early American politics. For Smith, however, these were all of a piece.

Despite spending a life trying to harmonize subjects and break down distinctions, Smith—unlike Wollstonecraft—did not seek radical equality in politics. Instead, he felt that the framers of the Articles had been deceived “by that elevated and sublime virtue which was displayed at that time by the whole mass of the people and so created a government unduly influenced by principles of pure democracy.”²⁰ Although Smith advocated for liberty, he saw pure democracy as paralyzing. He was politically opposed to Jefferson, yet in many ways shared Jefferson’s confidence that science would lead to moral and political improvement. That being said, Smith also shared the same disgruntled view of the world in the 1790s as his colleagues at the

College of New Jersey. He was alarmed by what he deemed a “democratic frenzy” during the French Revolution, and, in what was a rare entry into national politics, Smith even served as a presidential elector for John Adams in 1801. When Joseph Priestley visited America, Smith openly criticized both his methods and his eloquence, tying Priestley’s materialist beliefs to the political radicalism in France. Despite the radical egalitarianism that undergirds the science of his *Essay*, Smith’s political stances were representative of conservative Federalist positions throughout the 1790s.

While remembered at home for the tensions that led him to resign from the College of New Jersey in 1812, Smith is perhaps best-known abroad for the publication of his *Essay*, a text that enjoyed transatlantic circulation from 1787-1790, and was then expanded and reprinted in 1812. On why Smith undertook this essay, Noll speculates that “[his] interest may have been stimulated by his acquaintance with the Indian missions sponsored by the New Side Presbyterians in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, his associations with early opponents of slavery like Samuel Miller, or his contact with blacks in Virginia and to a lesser extent in New Jersey.”²¹ The immediate impetus behind organizing his thoughts on this matter, however, was David Ramsey, who appears to have shared a coach with Smith and Witherspoon one night, in which Smith and his companions discussed racial diversity. Following this encounter, Ramsey helped get Smith an honorary membership in the American Philosophical Society, and then invited him to deliver the society’s oration in 1787.

The oration was published later that year, and as Noll points out, “the essay was significant as a pioneering American effort in physical anthropology and for its consideration of the place of blacks in a white society.”²² Its immediate republication in both Edinburgh and London demonstrates its transatlantic appeal, and speaks to the essay’s relevance as part of growing conversations about race and the debates over

human origins. In the essay, Smith outright rejected Lord Kames' claim that there are different species of men, noting instead that "the goodness of the Creator appears in forming the whole world for man, and not confining him, like the inferior animals, to a bounded range. . . . The divine wisdom is seen in mingling in the human frame such principles as always tend to counteract the hazards of a new situation."²³ Here Smith opens up the possibility of an adaptable and unbounded human form (opposing it in this quote with the boundedness of inferior animals), articulating a Lamarckian understanding of environmental adaptation before Lamarck—although he was operating within a theological framework. Smith sought to demonstrate that science supported divine revelation, and that the unity of humanity was essential for a "Common Sense" moral philosophy.

While Smith appears more interested in method and science in his *Essay*, his scientific proof of revelation—which was leveled directly against Kames' *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774)—made him a champion of Christianity in the eyes of many of his contemporaries. His work was widely admired in the press and in the church, although he is familiar primarily to historians of science and critical race theorists today. As Noll argues, "compared with Kames, who wrestled seriously with the biblical record, Smith rested his case on the exclusive use of natural philosophy and was much less indebted to revelation."²⁴ Smith intended his *Essay* to be read primarily as a scientific and philosophical work, although he was aware of its theological value. Near the end of his life, Smith expressed his pleasure at knowing that Dugald Stewart, successor to Thomas Reid as leader of the Scottish "Common Sense" philosophers, and Georges Cuvier, France's greatest naturalist, had approved his essay.

Part of the international appeal of Smith's *Essay* was the way Smith demonstrated how, America becomes the site of new questions about human variety.

In addition to being at the center of ongoing debates about new species, taxonomies, and the possibility of degeneration, America was an important space for interrogating natural history in the context of slavery or as part of ongoing conversations about the adaptability of the “savage” natives. Smith uses slavery to support his claims about human plasticity, noting that the strongest physical distinctions are seen in the southern states of the U.S. between slaves and masters because of systemic inequality. Similarly, he describes frontiersmen living in nature and starting to resemble the natives, bolstering his argument that the primary distinctions between Indians and Anglo-Americans are the state of society. In her review, Wollstonecraft paraphrases one particular footnote from Smith’s *Essay* treating the issue of human variety among slaves. It offers a strong, biological case for emancipation: “the great difference between the domestic and field slaves, gives reason to believe that, if they were perfectly free, enjoyed property, and were admitted to a liberal participation of the society, rank, and privileges of their masters, they would change their African peculiarities much faster.”²⁵ That Wollstonecraft would gravitate toward this note in her review speaks to her awareness of the politically radical potential of Smith’s work. She not only recognizes his most explicit claim for the possibility of physical indistinction, but also hints at the idea that intellectual distinctions are the result of society rather than nature.

Mobility and mixture play important roles in his theory of human variety, and Smith is fascinated by how “unmixed” China and Arabia are, in contrast to England or America. Smith’s emphasis on the superiority of middle climates shows his Galenic leanings toward temperance and balance. Smith claims that “the temperate zone” is where the shape and function of eyes should “be esteemed a perfection.”²⁶ The middle zones are not only temperate zones, but also spaces of mixture. As the most desirable

climates, they attract a mixture of different peoples. Smith goes on to write: “All the principles of the human constitution unfolding themselves freely in such a region, and nature acting without constraint will be there seen most nearly in that perfection which was the original design and idea of the creator.”²⁷ Smith privileges America and England as beautiful because they are equal and mixed, placing them above unmixed and more restricted climates and societies. Of African slaves, he writes at great length about their ability to become more refined; he describes “Negroes” in America losing their scent and growing straighter hair as they are exposed to the new climate.²⁸ Smith also insists that manners, cultivation, and civilized habits affect complexion, in addition to climate. One of his most interesting references is to second and third generation Americans as second and third “races.”²⁹ Changes in climate and society, according to Smith, are capable of producing new races. This is his core claim.

Smith makes two additional claims about the influence of the state of society on human variation: “In the first place, that the effect of climate is augmented by a savage state, and corrected by a state of civilization,” and that “by the state of society many varieties in the human person are intirely formed.”³⁰ Smith argues elsewhere that savagery is not the natural state of man, but the result of inhabiting certain climates and states of society. Instead of imagining an initial state of nature in which man progresses out of savagery toward civilization, Smith sees civilization itself as the original state of man—a state that can degenerate under particular circumstances of climate and society. Here we see some overlap with Burke, who refused to acknowledge, even theoretically, the existence of a non-civil state of nature. Both men see the law of nature culminating in—if not always progressing toward—a state of civilization. Their views, however, seem to diverge when it comes to imagining what that civilized state looks like. For Smith, with the proper climate and the proper

education, one could theoretically imagine a race of men indistinct from one another. For political philosophers like Burke, on the other hand, all men have a station, and that distinction is necessary for the ordering of society.

The radical possibilities of Smith's work can be seen as he more closely examines the mutability of "savages" in his *Essay*. The hardships of their lives, the lack of nutrition, and a lack of personal hygiene "all have a prodigious effect to darken the complexion, to relax and emaciate the constitution, and to render the features coarse and deformed."³¹ For Smith, a state of civilization corrects this, and can even correct the effects of climate to some degree. This leads to beautifying the human form. As he writes, "all the features of the human countenance are *modified*, and its intire *expression* radically formed, by the state of society."³² Smith's claim that even savages can become perfected by society is a firm argument for human plasticity, and one that has political implications in an age of slavery and ongoing conflict with indigenous Americans. Wollstonecraft clearly saw the radical potential of these claims, highlighting Smith's reflections on African bodies and minds in her review. While Smith is primarily interested in how humankind produces infinite variety, indistinction becomes a theoretical and political possibility recognized by figures such as Wollstonecraft in his work—although he may not see it himself. By emphasizing the natural causes of infinite variety among men, Smith opens up the possibility that men could be also become infinitely indistinct. Human plasticity opens up both the possibility of sameness and difference, particularly as we move from individual distinctions to conceptualizing indistinction across (and between) species.

Smith continues to highlight the boundlessness of human variety alongside the infinite varieties of governance, an idea whose revolutionary potential would not have been lost on thinkers like Wollstonecraft: "As the degrees of civilization, as the ideas,

passions, and objects of society in different countries, and under different forms of government are infinitely various, they open a boundless field for variety in the human countenance.”³³ Smith continues by noting that these varieties become more deeply ingrained over time, particularly under a system where “families have held for ages the same stations in society. They are most conspicuous in those countries in which the laws have made the most complete and permanent division of ranks.”³⁴ In an argument that would be politically compelling for Wollstonecraft, he makes it clear that distinctions are conspicuous in countries where the laws—not nature—have created permanent divisions of ranks. Smith goes on to write:

If, in England there exists less difference between the figure and appearance of persons in the higher and lower classes of society than is seen in many other countries of Europe, it is because a more general diffusion of liberty and wealth has reduced the different ranks more nearly to a level. . . . Such distinctions are, as yet, less obvious in America; because the people enjoy a greater equality.³⁵

Ironically, Smith is providing a rather Burkean argument, although many of Burke’s detractors would not have recognized it as such. Smith clearly outlines the ways in which equality reduces not only political and social distinctions, but physical distinctions as well. Carried to its logical end, Smith’s *Essay* makes the case that radical political equality could lead to human indistinction. Indeed, Smith appears to be making a scientific case for the relationship between indistinction and equality by highlighting a reduction of distinctions in more democratic countries. If Smith sees equality as the natural and God-given state of existence, readers such as Wollstonecraft might argue for indistinction as a natural outcome.

The radical possibilities of indistinction, however, are not limited to politics. Smith's claims about the natural causes of indistinction open up the possibility of biological adaptation as well. In an early explanation of how climate affects complexion and figure, Smith describes how animals adapt to climate as justification for how humans adapt and compares his theories of changing complexions with the ways change occurs in animals. "We continually see the effect of this principle on the inferior animals," he writes, and "human nature, much more pliant, and affected by a greater variety of causes from food, from clothing, from lodging, and from manners, is still more easily susceptible of change, according to any general standard, or idea of the human form."³⁶ Smith sees humans as even more pliant than animals, and this extreme plasticity makes it difficult to erect any general standard of the human form. Not content with this comparison, he later proceeds to make a similar comparison between human transformation and that of vegetables: "The intense heat, which, in this region [Africa], makes such a prodigious change on the human constitution, equally transforms the whole race of beasts and of vegetables."³⁷ That the mutability of humans might lead them to be bred as animals or raised as produce becomes explicit in the essay as Smith writes: "If men in the affair of marriage were as much under management as some other animals, an absolute ruler might accomplish in his dominions almost any idea of the human form."³⁸ Smith goes on to note how this mutability of the human form enables the upper ranks greater access to perpetual improvement, demonstrating that their station isn't necessarily inherent in them, but in the conditions of their birth and generations of adaptation.

Smith turns to literary examples to further this point, arguing that "tales of romances that describe the superlative beauty of captive princesses, and the fictions of poets, who characterise their kings and nobles, by uncommon dignity of carriage and

elegance of person, and by an elevated turn of thinking, are not to be ascribed solely to the venality of writers prone to flatter the great, but have a real foundation in nature.”³⁹ Smith clearly recognizes the ways in which variety can be manipulated, demonstrating how susceptible the human countenance and human mind are to human systems (manners, wealth, and political institutions)—a susceptibility represented in romances. He continues by emphasizing that societal causes may have an even more potent effect on the human constitution than climate. He writes:

The state of manners and society in those republics [Bæotian and Attic] produced this difference more than the *Bæotian* air, to which it has been so often attributed. By the alteration of a few political, or civil, or commercial institutions . . . the establishment of which depended on a thousand accidental causes, Thebes might have become Athens, and Athens Thebes.⁴⁰

Smith’s emphasis on accidental causes here demonstrates his own discomfort with the notion of inherent distinctions, an idea Wollstonecraft later attacks in her political writings. In this passage, by linking climate and society, Smith brings science and politics together to argue instead that “a thousand accidental causes” can lead to infinite human variety. In his words, “the transmission of climatical or national differences ought not to appear surprising—the same law will account for both.”⁴¹ Here he explicitly links the biological and the cultural through shared laws.

While Smith argues that such changes are gradual, it is clear from the example above that he can imagine entire nations changing based on climate and societal factors. Later in the *Essay*, he discusses how this leads to infinite variety:

A nation which migrates to a different climate will, in time, be impressed with the characters of its new state. If this nation should afterwards

return to its original *seats*, it would not perfectly recover its primitive features and complexion, but would receive the impressions of the first climate, on the ground of those created in the second. . . . This exhibits a new cause of endless variety in the human countenance.⁴²

Smith thus acknowledges the imprint of habits, custom, and history on the human figure, and points out that shared climate and shared systems will not perfectly recover a given constitution. For Smith, human variety is constantly adapting; the human constitution may degenerate, but it never returns to the exact state it was in before. He goes on to write: “It is more easy to preserve acquired features or complexion, than to regain them after they have been lost.”⁴³ The political implications of this are rather conservative; while humans are adaptable, the difficulty of regaining lost features reifies existing cultural hierarchies.

Still, that distinctions are not inherent—but rather acquired over time and often accidental—remains important to Smith. As he notes, “the pliant nature of man is susceptible of change from the minutest causes, and these changes, habitually repeated, create at length conspicuous distinctions.”⁴⁴ They only solidify over time, in part due to heredity: “We see that figure, stature, complexion, features, diseases, and even powers of the mind, become hereditary.”⁴⁵ Ultimately, this leads Smith back to his original claim that humans are not inherently different; their varieties stem from natural and societal causes. He writes, “such differences prove, at least, that the human condition is susceptible of all the changes that are seen among men. It is not more astonishing that nations, than that individuals, should differ.”⁴⁶ More importantly, Smith argues at the end of his essay, that “The doctrine of one race removes this uncertainty, renders human nature susceptible of system, illustrates the powers of physical causes, and opens a rich and extensive field for moral science.”⁴⁷

This is perhaps the most important thing to recognize in Smith's writings: his abiding interest in the extent to which human nature is susceptible to systems.

Opening with a rejection of the idea that men are different species and ending with the claim that human nature is "infinitely various" and "infinitely mixed," Smith's *Essay* establishes a scientific foundation for this plasticity.⁴⁸ His examples establish the theoretical possibility of human indistinction, at least under the proper conditions of climate, government, and education. Moreover, his reliance on Galenic models of medicine to establish a climatist justification for human variety sets up a vision of disease as a natural and necessary agent of change, one which could possibly lead to radical equality—even if Smith's own politics feared unrestrained democracy. While Smith's *Essay* wasn't intended to be political, his case for plasticity as a marker of universal humanity opened up the radical possibility of human indistinction. He saw the unity of human nature as essential to a universal moral philosophy founded on "Common Sense," a need Wollstonecraft shared as she made the case for both democracy and the rights of women. Her arguments similarly rest on human plasticity (she is particularly interested in the role of education in shaping humans) and a Galenic model of understanding the body politic. In the following section, I examine more directly the ideas shared by Smith's *Essay* and Wollstonecraft's political theories, and the important roles that human plasticity and Galenic medicine play in her responses to Burke and her reaction to the aftermath of the French Revolution. Smith certainly was not politically radical in the mold of figures such as Thomas Paine, William Godwin, and Wollstonecraft. Yet this is precisely why he matters: his scientific ideas led to political ramifications that he himself would not endorse, and his writings provide an entry into the conversations that would continue to motivate Wollstonecraft as she interrogates the effects of both biological and political systems on human

nature. As we'll see in the next section, she takes scientific arguments like those made by Smith and extrapolates them into a more explicitly political context.

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT AND THE POLITICS OF INDISTINCTION

While Smith's *Essay* broadened the discourse of race by emphasizing biological and political environments as causes of human plasticity and human variance, it also provided a foundation for Wollstonecraft to make larger claims about political equality as a realizable human state (and one enjoyed by men and women). Contemplated through the lens of Smith's *Essay*, Wollstonecraft's political treatises and engagement with Burke suggest how pervasive the intertwined questions of religion, science, and politics became during the so-called "age of democratic revolutions." In *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate*, Daniel O'Neil makes "the assumption that political theory emerges most poignantly and powerfully from great political controversy and conflict."⁴⁹ Yet political theory does not merely emerge from political controversy; it is the confluence of multiple conflicts in a number of fields. Whereas figures such as Burke and John Adams (among others) attempted to theorize a politics of distinction amidst democratic revolutions by arguing for human distinctions as political and historical necessities, Wollstonecraft turns to biology and the natural sciences to theorize a politics of indistinction that, while still commenting on the political conflicts and controversies of this period, is rooted in a parallel debate in the sciences over human plasticity and variation. That debates over monogenism and polygenism ramp up alongside debates about political distinction and radical equality is no coincidence; just as the reemergence of evolutionary thought (and its opponents in the racial sciences) happens in the aftermath of various experiments with democracy.

Wollstonecraft's review of Smith's *Essay* represents an important (and transatlantic) point of intersection between these otherwise parallel narratives of biology and politics.

Thinking about what Smith's *Essay* means in the context of Wollstonecraft's political writings is not merely important for literary-historical reasons; it also establishes Wollstonecraft as a unique voice in the revolutionary debates of the 1790s. Mitzi Myers argues persuasively that Wollstonecraft's response is not merely a critique of Burke's political theory, but a moral argument that exposes "the cruel inequities which those theories presuppose."⁵⁰ I would take this argument further to recognize the ways in which Wollstonecraft's argument is not simply moral, but also biological. Wollstonecraft, like Smith, prefers to rely on scientific justifications for her moral and political arguments and uses science to undercut Burke's historical claims for a politics of custom and distinction.

In attacking Burke, Wollstonecraft often falls back on medical and biological rhetoric to make her case. In her critique of the vices of those distinguished by rank, for example, she writes: "A surgeon would tell you that by skinning over a wound you spread disease through the whole frame; and, surely, they indirectly aim at destroying all purity of morals, who poison the very source of virtue, by smearing a sentimental varnish over vice, to hide its natural deformity."⁵¹ She describes Burkean sentimentality as merely skinning over a wound to hide the natural deformities of his politics (which, for Wollstonecraft, are the vices attributed to rank). Wollstonecraft—like other authors in this project—repeatedly returns to the language of disease as a rhetorical strategy for exploring the relationship between political systems and human life. Like Smith, she saw disease as an agent of change and a precursor to radical equality—a possibility she clearly valued more than he did.

Similarly, Wollstonecraft latches onto Smith's language of "habits" in his *Essay*, a word that would become politically charged for her as she attacked Burke for his deference to habits and customs. In her review, she cites Smith's argument that:

When the climate constantly repeats the one of the other of these effects in any degree, then, in proportion, an habitual colour begins to be formed. Colour and figure may be styled habits of the body. Like other habits, they are created, not by great and sudden impressions, but by continual and almost imperceptible touches. Of habits both of mind and body, nations are susceptible as well as individuals.⁵²

Wollstonecraft gravitates toward claims with political resonance, here quoting Smith as he makes the leap from the susceptibility of individuals to habits to the susceptibility of nations. She highlights his arguments about color and form being like "habits of the body," and in her political writings, she argues that non-racial categories—most notably gender—are habits as well. Smith is clearly not the only influence on Wollstonecraft's political writings, yet her selection of this passage suggests that she sees human plasticity as essential to human variety, a claim that subtends future arguments about political equality.

Wollstonecraft goes on to cite Smith, who argues that "we find [humans] in all climates not only able to endure the change, but so assimilated by time, that we cannot say with certainty whose ancestor was the native of the clime, and whose the intruding foreigner."⁵³ She quotes Smith's claim here that human plasticity is such that distinctions between the native and the foreign become impossible to determine over time. These distinctions become even more difficult to maintain in nations that value equality. Wollstonecraft highlights the following passage from Smith's *Essay*: "Equality of rank and fortune in the citizens of the United States, similarity of

occupations, and of society, have produced such uniformity of character, that hitherto they are not strongly marked by such differences of feature as arise solely from social distinctions.”⁵⁴ As I noted in the previous section, Smith makes the case for why America is such an important space for examining human plasticity; it is a relatively equal society, and one that has thrown off the trappings of artificial distinctions.

Smith argues that, without a unity of the human species, “the science of morals would be absurd; the law of nature and nations would be annihilated; no general principles of human conduct, of religion, or of policy, could be framed; for human nature, originally infinitely various, and, by the changes of the world, infinitely mixed, could not be comprehended in any system.”⁵⁵ Like Smith, Wollstonecraft would later argue for a comprehensive system that could account for infinite variety, although she also sought a justification for radical equality. Human plasticity was certainly at the core of her arguments for education. Quoting again from Smith’s *Essay*, she writes, “The body and mind have such mutual influence, that whatever contributes to change the human condition in its form or aspect, has an equal influence on its powers of reason and genius. And these have again a reciprocal effect in forming the countenance.”⁵⁶ This is one of the most important passages for Wollstonecraft, who argues in her own writings that women need education, and are stifled by the lack of reason and genius as a result of societal forces. She believes that reason can be gained. Citing Smith again in her review, she writes, “the impressions of education, which singly taken are scarcely discernible, ultimately produce the greatest differences between men in society.”⁵⁷ Wollstonecraft’s inclusion of these sections on education preface the claims she will later make in *Rights of Woman*.

While theologians praised Smith’s *Essay* for its scientific defense of scriptural revelation, Wollstonecraft and others—more than Smith himself—recognized that the

Essay had larger political implications. Throughout her review, Wollstonecraft highlights the most politically-charged passages in Smith's *Essay*, particularly those observations that could be easily translated into commentaries on the body politic. For example, Wollstonecraft cites the following passage in her review: "Every permanent and characteristical variety in human nature, is effected by slow and almost imperceptible gradations. Great and sudden changes are too violent for the delicate constitution of man, and always tend to destroy the system."⁵⁸ Like Smith, Wollstonecraft is interested in the susceptibility of the human body to the environment, and she later uses similar language to explore the body's susceptibility to violent changes in political systems as well. Whereas Smith is talking specifically about changes occurring in human bodies, for Wollstonecraft a passage like this also offers a biological platform for explaining changes in the body politic.⁵⁹

Wollstonecraft's own interest in human plasticity explains why she wrote such a glowing review of Smith's *Essay*, while later rejecting the claims of figures such as Lavater, who posited a more rigid and bounded notion of the human. For example, she refers to the following "common-sense" argument by Smith in her review: "all features of the human countenance are modified, and its entire expression radically formed, by the state of society."⁶⁰ This claim becomes essential to Wollstonecraft's later writings, as she argues that human distinctions are not innate, but formed by habits and societies. It is imperative to Wollstonecraft that all humans—men and women alike—are mutable, and able to be shaped (however gradually) by the climates and habits around them. Her vindications in *Rights of Men* and *Rights of Woman* are grounded in a biological argument for equality. Notably, she ends *Rights of Woman* with the following: "Let there be then no coercion *established* in society, and the common law of gravity prevailing, the sexes will fall into their proper places."⁶¹ This invocation of

gravity allows Wollstonecraft an analogy that applies the idea of a natural, universal law to an argument for the equality among sexes. As I will demonstrate, Wollstonecraft sought a biological justification for equality in *Rights of Man*, one that armed her against Burke's claims that Dr. Price, like the French, harbored only an abstract, metaphysical notion of liberty. If equality, not distinction, is the biological default, equality is not an abstract, metaphysical concept—instead, it is deeply rooted in the physical (or natural) world. Wollstonecraft's review of Smith's *Essay* highlights the ways in which she participates in a similar discourse as she develops her own theories about mutability and natural causes; Smith's writings provide one framework for imagining a radical equality that is biologically justified.

While the passages Wollstonecraft selects for her review hint at the political implications of Smith's work, in the rest of the *Essay* Smith more carefully outlines his thoughts on human plasticity and demonstrates his own reliance on climatist Galenic models for understanding human variety. As a defense of the unity of humanity, Smith's essay opens by exploring the varieties of complexion in the human species. He pays particular attention to the principle of color, and one of his earliest examples makes a clear argument for the variety of complexion as a natural (and healthy) bodily reaction to changes in climate. Here Smith is drawing on an ancient theory of Galenic (humoral) medicine, although he—like other figures in the eighteenth century—argues that civilization is as capable of producing human variety as climate. Interestingly, he uses disease as an agent of this change, describing a southern disorder that sounds similar to the yellow fever:

Men [...] are usually attacked by dangerous disorders that leave the blood impoverished, and shed a yellow appearance over the skin. These disorders are perhaps the efforts of nature in breaking down and

changing the constitution, in order to accommodate it to the climate; or to give it that degree of relaxation, and to mingle with it that proportion of bile, which is necessary for its new situation.⁶²

A comparable view of disease will subtend Wollstonecraft's political arguments about revolution later in this chapter, and will have similar implications in the following chapters on Brown, Shelley, and Bird.⁶³ Smith's claims are both proto-evolutionary *and* draw on old-fashioned Galenic models; he sees natural causes as instruments of adaptation to new climates (and later to new societies). By making disease a natural (and necessary) agent of change, he sets up a framework for thinking about how disease not only affects the human constitution, but also human political systems and societies. Although it undercuts his own political views, this system opens up the possibility that leveling forces such as disease might be necessary agents of adaptation—agents that could lead to radical equality.⁶⁴ Smith's turn to disease as an agent of adaptation rather than degeneration also offers an important counterexample to Burke's later use of disease as metaphor for foreign invasion. Whereas Burke relies on a contagionist view of disease to figure the French Revolution as degenerate, Wollstonecraft—like Smith—draws on Galenic models of medicine to justify revolution when she argues that you must sometimes force a crisis to counter imbalance in the system. Wollstonecraft hints at the political and racial implications of these models in the selections of Smith's *Essay* she chose for her review.⁶⁵

Even though Wollstonecraft's review of Smith is a marker of the transatlantic dimension of the debate over human plasticity, I purposefully avoid arguing for a direct line of influence from Smith to Wollstonecraft. Rather, I want to emphasize how both authors participate in a similar move from the biological to the political in this period. In what follows, I demonstrate how this politics of indistinction develops

throughout her major political writings, beginning with her attack on hereditary distinctions in *Rights of Men* and ending with her use of Galenic language to justify the violence of the French Revolution. What begins as an argument that hereditary distinctions are unmanly and restrictive in *Rights of Men* sets up a more radical claim for gender indistinction in *Rights of Woman*—a claim that establishes equality as a necessary condition for human plasticity and improvement. By unmooring the sublime from the gendered categories established by Burke in his *Enquiry*, Wollstonecraft also establishes equality as a necessary condition for sublimity, setting up later authors to embrace the Gothic as an important genre for exploring indistinction.

In her earliest tract, *Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft sets out to respond directly to Burke by asserting that the “birthright of man . . . is such a degree of liberty, civil and religious, as is compatible with the liberty of every other individual with whom he is united in a social compact.”⁶⁶ Establishing liberty as a right universal to all men, she argues that it “has never yet received a form in the various governments that have been established on our beauteous globe.”⁶⁷ She attributes this failure of liberty to several causes: most notably hereditary property and the tendency for men like Burke to “reverence the rust of antiquity, and term the unnatural customs, which ignorance and mistaken self-interest have consolidated, the sage fruit of experience.”⁶⁸ Indeed, Wollstonecraft refers to Burke as having a “bigoted veneration for antiquity.”⁶⁹ and refers to his ambition as “irrational.”⁷⁰ She proposes in its place a virtuous ambition by opening up education and reason for women, the poor, and others—not just those who inherit it. Here belief that societal and educational changes can shape people echoes the claims made earlier by Smith. In sharp contrast to Burke’s fears of a mobile, “swinish multitude,” Wollstonecraft argues against what she describes as a Burkean worldview: that “we ought cautiously to remain for ever in frozen inactivity,

because a thaw, whilst it nourishes the soil, spreads a temporary inundation.”⁷¹ Her argument against inactivity (an inactivity that denies human plasticity) is one she will return to in her *Rights of Woman* and *French Revolution*, and one her daughter, Mary Shelley, will interrogate in *The Last Man*.

Much of the emotional impetus behind *Rights of Men* comes from Burke’s attack on Dr. Price, a close friend to Wollstonecraft. Yet she does concede that “Price’s political opinions are Utopian reveries, and that the world is not yet sufficiently civilized to adopt such a sublime system of morality.”⁷² Wollstonecraft shares Price’s optimism, if not the entirety of his proposed systems: “I reverence the rights of men.— Sacred rights! for which I acquire a more profound respect, the more I look into my own mind; and, professing these heterodox opinions, I still preserve my bowels; my heart is human, beats quick with human sympathies.”⁷³ Valuing equality is akin to being human, or—attacking Burke in his own language—being manly. Distinctions which produce inequality are unmanly; they are the product of artificial sympathies. She writes, “among unequals there can be no society;—giving a manly meaning to the term; from such intimacies friendship can never grow; if the basis of friendship is mutual respect, and not a commercial treaty.”⁷⁴ Referring to the National Assembly, she writes more explicitly: “Time may shew, that this obscure throng knew more of the human heart and of legislation than the profligates of rank, emasculated by hereditary effeminacy.”⁷⁵ Here effeminacy is used both as unmanly, but also as a subtle critique of the ways in which females are shut out from improvement and reason by artificial distinctions made between the sexes. Wollstonecraft thus attacks Burke and his colleagues as effeminate, while also attacking the term itself.

For Wollstonecraft, this effeminacy is a direct result of the influence of society on the human constitution. Like Smith, she believes that society can mold and shape

men and she argues that hereditary property and honors have stifled man's growth.⁷⁶ Critiquing Burke, she writes that "man has been changed into an artificial monster by the station in which he was born," when "true happiness [arises] from the friendship and intimacy which can only be enjoyed by equals."⁷⁷ By imposing artificial distinctions upon men, hereditary property and social distinctions violate natural rights. "It is necessary emphatically to repeat," she writes, "that there are rights which men inherit at their birth, as rational creatures, who were raised above the brute creation by their improvable faculties. . . . prescription can never undermine natural rights."⁷⁸ For Wollstonecraft, equality is essential to human improvement (plasticity); it is the right of all men—all members of the human species—and it is a right that is violated when men are kept from improving by limiting distinctions upheld only by artificial customs. Wollstonecraft argues that Burke's affections for heredity, nobility, customs make nobility into nothing more than "monsters in human shape," and asks: "How can he discover that he is a man, when all his wants are instantly supplied, and invention is never sharpened by necessity?"⁷⁹ In *Rights of Women*, Wollstonecraft dedicates an entire chapter to the "pernicious effects which arise from the unnatural distinctions established in society," building upon these claims. In that text, she notes, "what but habitual idleness can hereditary wealth and titles produce?"⁸⁰ She similarly argues that "the character of every man is, in some degree, formed by his profession."⁸¹ Wollstonecraft believes a lack of experience (and certain professions—or a lack of—as well) can have a degenerative effect on the human condition, here offering a critique of British masculinity where nobility becomes a degenerate state incapable of adaptation and improvement.⁸²

Wollstonecraft's mode of argument here is that habits such as heredity and professions—in addition to what Smith calls the habits of body—create distinctions

between rich and poor, or the nobility and the peasant class. Yet whereas Smith used this to indicate why the nobility might be prone to beauty, Wollstonecraft argues that their station deprives them of the necessary experiences and habits to cultivate reason. She makes a similar claim about women, who are deprived of education and expectations, but then argues that a change in society can remedy this situation and remove these distinctions (and the necessary evils brought about by them). In *Rights of Woman* she writes: “Riches and honours prevent a man from enlarging his understanding, and enervate all his powers by reversing the order of nature, which has ever made true pleasure the reward of labour.”⁸³ This description is fitting, as elsewhere Wollstonecraft mentions Washington as an exemplar of this mode, pulling from the American Revolution models of equality and indistinction.

That Wollstonecraft is familiar with Smith is important because of the significant place America plays in his treatise. She explicitly draws attention to this in her review, acknowledging that “his residence in America facilitated his researches and gives weight to his conclusions.”⁸⁴ Clearly, the political implications of Smith’s residence and experiences in America are part of what led Wollstonecraft to praise his work. In crafting her response in *Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft was responding not just to Burke, but also to figures such as John Adams, who supported the American experiment with democracy while advocating for distinctions of rank and gender. By the time she wrote *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* in 1794, Wollstonecraft began to take a proto-evolutionary view of political progress. She cites the American republic as a model of evolutionary progress rather than degeneracy (which she admittedly saw in aspects of the French Revolution), noting that “the anglo-americans appeared to be another race of beings.”⁸⁵ In this regard she echoes the claims of Burke and Adams. Yet she ultimately sees the French Revolution as

unnatural *not* because equality is unnatural, but because the conditions under which equality was pursued were unnatural. Her comparisons between the political environments in America and France help her argue for radical equality even as she became disenchanted with the violence of the French Revolution.

Wollstonecraft continues to attack Burke in *Rights of Men* by questioning his support for the American revolution—continuing to make America an important space of contestation—since the “whole tenour of his plausible arguments settles slavery on an everlasting foundation.” This is due, in her words, to his “servile reverence for antiquity.”⁸⁶ In making this argument, she writes, “For who shall dare to complain of the venerable vestige of the law that rendered the life of a deer more sacred than that of a man?”⁸⁷ While this is most immediately a commentary on the game laws in Britain, by comparing human life with the life of a deer (which was considered property under said laws), Wollstonecraft also invokes the ongoing justifications for slavery in the Atlantic world: namely, that some humans are brutes, or a different species. This is exactly the premise she argues against, claiming that men are distinct by reason and thus worthy of equality and the right to improve themselves. She continues by accusing Burke of treating other humans as both property and animals (as livestock), writing: “You have shewn, Sir, by your silence on these subjects, that your respect for rank has swallowed up the common feelings of humanity; you seem to consider the poor as only the live stock of an estate, the feather of hereditary nobility.”⁸⁸ By fixing political and social distinctions and making them hereditary, Wollstonecraft argues that Burke equates blacks, those of the lower classes, and women to animals. “Brutes hope and fear, love and hate; but, without a capacity to improve, a power of turning these passions to good or evil, they neither acquire virtue nor wisdom—Why? Because

the Creator has not given them reason.”⁸⁹ She argues against rank and also against the sentimentality of Burke’s historical arguments.

Inequality similarly stifles reason for Wollstonecraft, because it limits one’s ability to exercise the understanding; as she notes, “the power of exercising our understanding raises us above the brutes.”⁹⁰ Even in this early treatise, Wollstonecraft begins to make important gendered arguments as she critiques the masculine nature of the sublime (as Burke describes it). She pushes back against the idea that women are inherently less rational than men: “you have clearly proved that one half of the human species, at least, have not souls; and that Nature, by making women *little, smooth, delicate, fair* creatures, never designed that they should exercise their reason.”⁹¹ This leads to a comparison of women with animals:

If beautiful weakness be interwoven in a woman’s frame, if the chief business of her life be (as you insinuate) to inspire love, and Nature had made an eternal distinction between the qualities that dignify a rational being and this animal perfection, her duty and happiness in this life must clash with any preparation for a more exalted state.⁹²

Here we see the coupling of Wollstonecraft’s arguments for gender equality with a theological argument about the “exalted state” of men and women. She also counters the notion of women as mere companions to rational men with the fairly obvious argument that such reasoning dehumanizes women and puts them on par with nonhuman animals. By resisting “beautiful weakness” as a defining feature of women, Wollstonecraft makes a subtle attack on the gendered descriptions of the sublime and the beautiful as outlined by Burke in his *Enquiry*.

Wollstonecraft makes it clear that the only distinction that matters is that between humans and nonhuman animals: humans have the capacity for both reason

and virtue. She argues that all men and women should be given the chance to obtain virtue, but “such a glorious change can only be produced by liberty. Inequality of rank must ever impede the growth of virtue.”⁹³ She then takes Burke to task for his dismissive criticisms of the lower classes and their role in the revolution:

If this grand example be set by an assembly of unlettered clowns, if they can produce a crisis that may involve the fate of Europe, and ‘more than Europe,’ you must allow us to respect unsophisticated reason, and reverence the active exertions that were not relaxed by a fastidious respect for the beauty of rank, or a dread of the deformity produced by any *void* in social structure.⁹⁴

If we remember that rank is still a description used for the animal kingdom and that void alludes to the natural void, we see that Wollstonecraft is speaking to both biological and political concerns. Her reference to a “dread of deformity” speaks to eighteenth-century concerns about radical equality and species indistinction as formless voids. In an attempt to avoid formless spaces, naturalists in the eighteenth century obsessively identified new species (including hybrid species) in order to fill perceived “gaps” in the great chain of being. A gap in nature equates to a gap in hierarchy or station, and Wollstonecraft’s response to Burke challenges both a biological and a political distinction of ranks.⁹⁵ She regrets this change could not be brought about by those of rank: “I am afraid that human nature is still in such a weak state, that the abolition of titles, the corner-stone of despotism, could only have been the work of men who had no titles to sacrifice.”⁹⁶ This lack of activity (or “active exertions”) is what Wollstonecraft sees as one of the primary limitations on the nobility’s ability to enact change.⁹⁷ Burke’s “dread of deformity” only strengthens his

commitment to distinction and rank, whereas Wollstonecraft turns to formlessness and indistinction in order to imagine radical equality.

Wollstonecraft closes out *Rights of Men* by claiming, “the manners of man may change without end; but, wherever reason receives the least cultivation—wherever men rise above brutes, morality must rest on the same base.” She goes on to write, “the more man discovers of the nature of his mind and body, the more clearly he is convinced, that to act according to the dictates of reason is to conform to the law of God.”⁹⁸ The coupling of reason and morality here is important, as it echoes Smith’s coupling of science and theology.⁹⁹ Both authors remain convinced that the truths about human nature must be founded on a belief in human unity and scientific principles. Wollstonecraft takes the next step by explicitly arguing that “virtue can only flourish amongst equals.”¹⁰⁰ She concludes *Rights of Men* with a somewhat qualified endorsement of the French Revolution; an endorsement that recognizes the revolution as an experiment with radical equality. The question she asks is whether or not it can be implemented and exist more than theoretically: “Whether the one the French have adopted will answer the purpose better, and be more than a shadow of representation, time can only shew. In theory it appears more promising.”¹⁰¹ Wollstonecraft’s interest in the susceptibility of humanity to systems leads her to imagine the French Revolution as an important experiment, one that “in theory” promises a radical equality enabling by social and political indistinction.

While Wollstonecraft seems to operate within a shared discourse with Smith in *Rights of Men*, her familiarity with such arguments becomes more apparent as she argues for gender indistinction in *Rights of Woman*. There, she opens with a similar argument that women have not been treated as humans, and breaks down the gender distinctions in order to claim more fully humanity for women. She opens by noting

“that either nature has made a great difference between man and man, or that the civilization which has hitherto taken place in the world has been very partial.”¹⁰² She blasts men as guilty of “considering females rather as women than human creatures,” and argues that “[women] are treated as a kind of subordinate beings, and not as a part of the human species.”¹⁰³ Wollstonecraft lays out her argument: “I shall first consider women in the grand light of human creatures, who, in common with men, are placed on this earth to unfold their faculties.”¹⁰⁴ She seeks a universal humanity that specifically articulates the equality of women and justifies their inclusion among the ranks of men. She argues that, in their current state, women are treated like domestic animals: “the sexual weakness that makes woman depend on man for a subsistence, produces a kind of cattish affection which leads a wife to purr about her husband as she would about any man who fed and caressed her.”¹⁰⁵ The domestication of women limits their ability to progress, and restricted access to society inhibits their ability to develop that which makes them human: reason and virtue.

As Wollstonecraft notes in *Rights of Men*, she believes men are distinct from brutes due to their capacity for reason. It is clear, however, that immediate respondents to her work saw these calls for indistinction as potentially threatening to even this human-animal distinction.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps the best example of this is *Vindication of the Rights of Brutes* (1792), a satirical pamphlet by Thomas Taylor published in response to Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Women*, and—to a lesser extent—Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man*. The final paragraph of Taylor’s pamphlet is worth quoting at length:

And thus much may suffice, for an historical proof, that brutes are equal to men. It only now remains (and this must be the province of some abler hand) to demonstrate the same great truth in a similar manner, of vegetables, minerals, and even the most apparently contemptible clod

of earth; that thus this sublime theory being copiously and accurately discussed, and its truth established by an indisputable series of facts, government may be entirely subverted, subordination abolished, and all things every where, and in every respect, be common to all.¹⁰⁷

Written as a satirical attack, Taylor's "vindication" is not entirely unfounded. Smith, for example, in his *Essay*, make comparisons between human plasticity and that of vegetables in different climates. Similarly, Wollstonecraft's repeated comparisons between men, women, and animals highlights a slippery boundary between the human and the nonhuman. Taylor's final line is telling: these claims for biological indistinction lead to a vision of radical political indistinction in which "all things every where" become "common to all"—including property, wives, and bodies. Taylor refers to this radical indistinction as a "sublime theory" that is expressly subversive.

Wollstonecraft's animal comparisons are more explicit in *Rights of Woman* than in her other treatises. She argues that women need to be "[raised] in the scale of animal being, when they are comprehensively termed mankind," and notes with some frequency the similar treatment of both women and animals.¹⁰⁸ And, in what likely disturbed figures like Taylor, she argues that "humanity to animals" should be part of national education. She makes comparisons between treatment of the poor and treatment of animals, and refers to animals as part of family. Her basis for these claims is not strictly moral; it is also biological. Here we see a shift in the way Wollstonecraft engages with indistinction as she moves from a conversation about human equality to challenging the distinctions between humans and animals. This shift to human-animal indistinction marks the radical possibilities of Wollstonecraft's writings. At one point, she uses contemporary anatomy to argue against Rousseau regarding the state of nature and man's status as a carnivorous animal.¹⁰⁹

Wollstonecraft also uses naturalists to discuss the age of maturity among men and women. “It is proper to observe, that animals who arrive more slowly at maturity, are the longest lived, and of the noblest species. Men cannot, however, claim any natural superiority from the grandeur of longevity; for in this respect nature has not distinguished the male.”¹¹⁰ Wollstonecraft’s claims that gender indistinction is natural are rooted in biological claims in a manner that echoes the ways in which Smith draws upon naturalist comparisons between human and nonhuman animals to make claims about human adaptability in his *Essay*.¹¹¹

Wollstonecraft makes her most radical and explicit statement about gender indistinction when she writes, “I do earnestly wish to see the distinction of sex confounded in society.”¹¹² At no other moment is she so blunt about her intentions with this essay, making it clear that she not only sees these distinctions as artificial, but that they should be confounded. She goes on to ask, “Can she believe that she was only made to submit to man, her equal, a being, who, like her, was sent into the world to acquire virtue?”¹¹³ And then, “Is one half of the human species, like the poor African slaves, to be subject to prejudices that brutalize them?”¹¹⁴ Here we see gender distinctions placed alongside racial distinctions—distinctions which, as Wollstonecraft validated in her review of Smith, were the result of climate and society. What’s more, here she uses this argument to push more actively for political change. She argues, for example, that women should be represented in government, an explicit example of such change. She then argues for education reform on a national level, calling for mixed classes of boys and girls educated on the same model. She specifically calls for an elementary day school, “where boys and girls, the rich and poor, should meet together. And to prevent any of the distinctions of vanity, they should be dressed alike, and all obliged to submit to the same discipline.”¹¹⁵ Wollstonecraft summarizes her

claims by writing, “I principally wish to enforce the necessity of educating the sexes together to perfect both . . . they should be sent to school to mix with a number of equals, for only by the jostlings of equality can we form a just opinion of ourselves.”¹¹⁶ Wollstonecraft privileges an educational space that is mixed and equal, much like Smith privileged similar spaces as he discussed the best adaptations of the human constitution in his *Essay*.¹¹⁷

Even as late as her account of the *French Revolution* (1794), Wollstonecraft continued to echo the work of Smith in her writings. This account, in particular, seems rooted in a similarly Galenic mode of understanding the body and the body politic. Where her two vindications grappled primarily with the intersections of biology and politics in terms of human plasticity, this account more explicitly attempts to reconcile her optimism for the revolution and a disheartened view of its violence through the rhetoric of medicine—and, more specifically, a climatist view of medicine that directly opposes a Burkean view of revolution and revolutionary ideals as contagion. Wollstonecraft writes in her account, “it is the uncontaminated mass of the [French] nation, whose minds begin to grasp the sentiments of freedom, that has secured the equilibrium of the state.”¹¹⁸ Referring to the need for political equilibrium calls to mind a Galenic model of health that equates equality and balance with wellness. Attempting to reconcile her revolutionary ideals with the accusations of violence and failure from all sides, she goes on to argue:

The revolution was neither produced by the abilities or intrigues of a few individuals; nor was the effect of sudden and short-lived enthusiasm; but the natural consequence of intellectual improvement, gradually proceeding to perfection in the advancement of communities, from a state of barbarism to that of polished society.¹¹⁹

Working against the foreign body model of disease that Burke used as a metaphor for the French Revolution, in which revolution is seen as a contagion brought about by a select few, Wollstonecraft argues that the revolution was a natural effect of a community seeking to improve by bringing equality and balance to the system.

One of the more striking observations Wollstonecraft makes as she attempts to contextualize the French Revolution comes in the form of a commentary on the French diet. Struggling to reconcile her French sympathies with the violence of the revolution, Wollstonecraft speaks at length about how the French were “not properly qualified” for the revolution, drawing comparisons with the American Revolution.¹²⁰ As part of this, she explains how the French diet affects their constitutions and characters:

Besides, the very manner of living in France gives a lively turn to the character of the people; for by the destruction of animal juices, in dressing their food, they are subject to none of the dullness, the effect of more nutritive diet in other countries; and this gaiety is increased by the moderate quantity of weak wine, which they drink at their meals, bidding defiance to phlegm.¹²¹

Along with descriptions of French customs, climate, and political tendencies, this view of the French as a passionate and lively people (which led, in Wollstonecraft’s eyes, to a somewhat overzealous and violent revolution) echoes Smith’s descriptions of how diet, climate, and the state of society produce variety in humans—demonstrating again a discourse of human plasticity circulating in the Atlantic world at this time.

Wollstonecraft uses natural causes to reconcile what she sees as important French ideals with the violence of their political upheaval, and to also reconcile the different outcomes in which democratic revolutions played out in America and France.

That being said, Wollstonecraft ultimately believes the revolution will have salubrious effects on France. She compares the political progress of France, for example, to the progress of medical science. She writes, “though thousands have perished the victims of empirics, and of despots, yet the improvements made both in medicine and moral philosophy have kept a sure, though gradual pace.”¹²² Her belief in a steady forward progress leads her to argue that “if men have not clearly discovered a specific remedy for every evil, physical, moral, and political, it is to be presumed, that the accumulation of experimental facts will greatly tend to lessen them in the future.”¹²³ This passage reveals that, like Smith, Wollstonecraft sees harmony between the physical, moral, political sciences.¹²⁴ It also reveals her faith in experimental philosophy; she values experiments as a necessary part of scientific and political processes. Wollstonecraft shares this in common with Smith and others who argued that “experiment in morals as well as in physics [sic] is the only proper source of truth, & guide of reasoning.”¹²⁵ As Noll writes, Smith “believed in [science’s] power to ferret out the secrets of the world—human nature, politics, history, religious and ethical experience, as well as chemistry, astronomy, and applied mathematics,” a widely held view at the turn of the century.¹²⁶ Just as Smith relies on scientific evidence to make theological claims about human origins (and vice versa), Wollstonecraft borrows from the language of science to undergird her political theories.

Wollstonecraft ends her account of the French Revolution with an image of the diseased political state as a necessary precursor to political health, claiming that, while “a change of character cannot be so sudden as some sanguine calculators expect,” leveling is necessary for progress.¹²⁷ She argues that revolution is the natural result of enlightened progress toward equality. Although she would not have known it, Smith made a similar remark in 1784, noting that while revolutions were certainly

disruptive, “when we consider that human society can only advance to a certain period before it becomes corrupted, and begins to decline, and that letters always decline with virtue, revolutions are perhaps the necessary scaffolding by which science and human nature must gradually arrive at their summit.”¹²⁸ Revolutions, while sometimes painful, are necessary. Again, both authors draw on a Galenic understanding of crisis as a necessary part of the restorative process for the body (and, for Wollstonecraft, the body politic). In her final words, Wollstonecraft writes:

Thus had France grown up, and sickened on the corruption of a state diseased. But, as in medicine there is a species of complaint in the bowels which works it's own cure, and, leaving the body healthy, gives an invigorated tone to the system, so there is in politics: and whilst the agitation of it's [sic] regeneration continues, the excrementitious humours exuding from the contaminated body will excite a general dislike and contempt for the nation; and it is only the philosophical eye, which looks into the nature and weighs the consequences of human actions, that will be able to discern the cause.¹²⁹

Wollstonecraft, like Burke, thinks about democracy here as a disease. Yet for her, it is not a plague that leads to decay; instead, it is a purging force whose leveling sets the stage for future growth. That Wollstonecraft ends her preface to *French Revolution* by dismissing the old society as a “tremendous empire of superstition and hypocrisy, erected upon the ruins of Gothic brutality and ignorance” seems important in this regard.¹³⁰ Wollstonecraft imagines a new society purged of these trappings, a society where equality paves the way for a new Gothic sensibility that appeals to an earlier tradition in British literature in which the Gothic is instead tied to political liberty.

While Smith's attack on polygenism and Wollstonecraft's attack on Burke may not seem immediately to be part of the same conversation, both demonstrate an emergent transatlantic interest in the political and biological consequences of equality and human plasticity. While Smith was perhaps less aware (or less interested) in the political consequences of human plasticity, for Wollstonecraft an engagement with the science of human variety became foundational to her political theories, her response to Burke's politics of distinction, and her justifications of radical equality and the French Revolution. Wollstonecraft's turn to biology shapes not only her response to Burke's *Reflections*, but to his theory of the sublime and the beautiful. In addition, her use of disease as the metaphorical agent that brings about the fall of this old society provides an important preface to the work of Brown, Shelley, and Bird. Indeed, all three of these authors literalize that metaphor in their own works in an attempt to imagine what a new Gothic might look like—and what that new mode says about democracy and the boundaries of the human. Wollstonecraft's rejection of the "superstitions" of an older Gothic mode sets up a clear foundation for Brown's preface to *Edgar Huntly*, in which he outlines a new, distinctly American Gothic mode. That Brown was not only familiar with Wollstonecraft, but actually drew from her aesthetic, is clear in his attempt to write an American version of her *Rights of Woman* in his first published work: *Alcuin: A Dialogue* (1798). In the following chapter, I explore in more depth the ways in which Brown's American Gothic mode draws heavily on Wollstonecraft's insistence on indistinction as a biological foundation for radical equality.

NOTES

¹ Almost two years would pass before Wollstonecraft again tackled natural history and science by reviewing the work of figures such as Johann Kaspar Lavater, William Smellie, and Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon. Her reviews primarily focused on educational works, travelogues, and fiction.

² Janet Todd has described Wollstonecraft the reviewer as “a new literary partisan[;] she vigorously attacked the rival, more established journals: the *Critical Review* was ‘timid, mean’, she declared, and the *Monthly Review* tame and sycophantic.” Janet Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2000), 139. Yet, whereas Todd argues that “no one could accuse her of these faults,” Wollstonecraft’s review of Smith was perhaps recklessly congratulatory; it certainly stood out against the more critical tone she used when reviewing other texts, 139. The length of this review alone puts Smith in the same company as Samuel Johnson, Frances Burney, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Catharine Macaulay, and Charlotte Smith—all reviewed by Wollstonecraft for the *Analytical Review*.

³ Kames later backed away from these arguments, but his *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774) provided Smith with a convenient starting point for making his own claims about the unity of the human species.

⁴ Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1989), 7:50-51.

⁵ Compare this language with the opening to another one of Wollstonecraft’s reviews from this period: “It is almost insufficient to say of this insipid production, that its preposterous incidents, and absurd sentiments, can only be equaled by the affected and unintelligible phrases the author has laboriously culled.” Ibid., 27. This example contrasts sharply with her review of Smith’s *Essay*.

⁶ Scott Juengel has similarly recognized this as an exceptional review in his essay on the influence of Smith in Wollstonecraft’s *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796). He writes: “Quoting liberally from Smith’s treatise (and the review is one of the longest she wrote for Johnson’s periodical), Wollstonecraft reveals her partiality. . . . Smith’s claims are often posited as ‘the verdict of common sense,’ so much so that a long passage on the constrictive effects of cold weather on the face is framed as that which ‘could not have escaped the most superficial observer,’ and the monogenist’s discussion of ‘habits of the body’ is authorized as that which ‘the naturalist will allow to have great force,’” 907. See Juengel, “Countenancing History: Mary Wollstonecraft, Samuel Stanhope Smith, and Enlightenment Racial Science,” *ELH* 68.4 (2001), 897-927.

⁷ Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 7:51-55.

⁸ Samuel Stanhope Smith, *An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species. To Which are Added, Strictures on Lord Kames’s Discourse on the Original Diversity of Mankind* (Edinburgh: C. Elliot, 1788), 9-10. All references made to Smith’s *Essay* refer to the edition published in Edinburgh (1788) as this is the edition Wollstonecraft reviewed for the *Analytical Review*.

⁹ One important text that was published in the same year as Smith’s *Essay* was Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), which—as Winthrop D. Jordan has noted—“contained both an eloquent denunciation of slavery and unfavorable remarks about Negroes which suggested to many readers that Jefferson thought they were inherently and hence permanently inferior to white men.” Samuel Stanhope Smith, *An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species*, ed. Winthrop D. Jordan (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1965), xv. Smith famously attempted to refute Jefferson’s claims. Also in 1787, the United States was mired in debates over the proposed Constitution, in which slavery, human diversity, and equality were key themes. For a more detailed exploration of the relationship between race and theology, see Colin Kidd’s *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000* (2006).

¹⁰ It is worth noting that, for Smith, the languages of science and religion were not separate discourses, but part of the same mental framework. The discourse of equality that emerges in his work is not merely political, but also scientific and theological. All these come together in his work and inform one another.

¹¹ Katy Chiles compellingly argues for the political implications of Smith’s work, noting that “Smith’s explanation for the varieties of men cam from an optimistic and egalitarian outlook on all of humankind. Indeed, it is this kind of thinking that Phillis Wheatley and Samson Occom draw upon in their articulations for equality. Differences in humans were not inherent, natural, or inevitable. For Smith, they

were produced over time; originally, everyone was the same.” Katy L. Chiles, *Transformable Race: Surprising Metamorphoses in the Literature of Early America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 182-183. Chiles also usefully points out Smith’s absence from Wollstonecraft’s later review of Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789). Equiano chose to endorse Thomas Clarkson’s *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African* (1786) instead, because “Clarkson’s theory implies that whiteness itself could be thought of as degenerative” whereas Smith saw Native Americans and Africans as degenerative, 157.

¹² Thinkers sympathetic to Smith’s claims—such as Wollstonecraft—embraced his claims of universal humanity and brought them to bear more explicitly on the political debates of the 1790s. Wollstonecraft, in particular, draws from Smith’s arguments for human plasticity and his invocation of a Galenic (or humoral) understanding of the body to make a political case for equality among bodies and bodies politic.

¹³ Smith, *Essay* (1965), xvii. Other scholars have noted Smith’s impact on early Americans’ understandings of race in this period. See, for example, William Stanton’s *The Leopard’s Spots: Scientific Attitudes Toward Race in America, 1815-59* (1960), Winthrop Jordan’s *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (1968), and Bruce Dain’s *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic* (2003). Chiles has also made a compelling argument for Smith’s relevance to early American thinkers and novelists such as Benjamin Franklin, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, Charles Brockden Brown in *Transformable Race* (2014).

¹⁴ It is worth noting the absence of this review from most critical discussions of Wollstonecraft as a reviewer. Even those who recognize the importance of her engagement with science have ignored her review of Smith’s essay. One example of this occurs in a recent essay by Jane Spencer, in which she draws heavily from Wollstonecraft’s brief review of an abridged edition of Buffon’s *Histoire Naturelle* and a longer (and more critical) review of Smellie’s *Philosophy of Natural History*. Despite arguing that Wollstonecraft is well-read in texts from science and natural history, Spencer misses Wollstonecraft’s lengthy review of Smith’s *Essay*. See Spencer, “The Link which Unites Man with Brutes’: Enlightenment Feminism, Women and Animals,” *Intellectual History Review* 22:3 (2012), 427-444.

¹⁵ Although Wollstonecraft is primarily interested in the political and biological implications of Smith’s work, it is worth noting that by picking up his science she also—to some extent—picks up his theology. The final paragraph of her review hints at this, noting that if Smith’s work is found conclusive “harmony will again be apparent in the works of God,” thus making “visible the wisdom of the Supreme Being.” Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 7:55.

¹⁶ Here it is important to remember that Wollstonecraft was a member of Joseph Johnson’s circle—a radical community of artists, scholars, and scientists—and worked on the *Analytical Review*, a journal that published and reviewed a number of texts on science, natural history, and medicine.

¹⁷ Madison to his father, Sept. 30, 1769, in *The Papers of James Madison*, vol. 1, 16 March 1751-16 December 1779, ed. William T. Hutchinson and William M. C. Rachal (Chicago, 1962), 45.

¹⁸ The biographical details of Smith’s life have been taken primarily from Mark A. Noll, *Princeton and the Republic, 1768-1822: The Search for a Christian Enlightenment in the Era of Samuel Stanhope Smith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

¹⁹ Noll, *Princeton and the Republic*, 101.

²⁰ Smith, drawn from *The Divine Goodness to the United States of America* (1795) and a letter he wrote to Charles Nisbet. Quoted in Michael Kraus, “Charles Nisbet and Samuel Stanhope Smith—Two Eighteenth Century Educators,” *Princeton University Library Chronicle* (1944) 6:17-36.

²¹ Noll, 115.

²² *Ibid.*, 116.

²³ Smith, *Essay* (1788), 178.

²⁴ Noll, 122.

²⁵ Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 7:63n.

²⁶ Smith, *Essay* (1788), 70.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 48. Smith offers a list of some elements that make up this state: "The state of society comprehends diet, clothing, lodging, manners, habits, face of the country, objects of science, religion, interests, passions, and ideas of all kinds, infinite in number and variety." *Ibid.*, 67.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

³² *Ibid.*, 54.

³³ *Ibid.*, 55.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 99-100.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁴⁹ Daniel O'Neil, *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate: Savagery, Civilization, and Democracy* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 3.

⁵⁰ Mitzi Myers, "Politics from the Outside: Mary Wollstonecraft's First *Vindication*." *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 6 (1977): 119.

⁵¹ Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 5:25.

⁵² Smith, *Essay* (1788), 11-12.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 61.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 113.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 79.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 90.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁹ Here I would like to highlight how a theological position affects a scientific text and then has radical political implications. This interplay reflects how all these discourses informed one another, and how a person primarily interested in science (like Smith) still came to his claims through theology, while a person primarily interested in politics (like Wollstonecraft) looked to science for support.

⁶⁰ Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 5:53.

⁶¹ Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 7:68.

⁶² Smith, *Essay* (1788), 16.

⁶³ Roxann Wheeler astutely notes: “Throughout the century, the novel, natural history, and four-stages theory shared the assumption of a changeable but universal human nature. The novel’s adherence to a common humanity and a sensible body well into the nineteenth century meant that it maintained older ways of articulating human nature longer than scientific and philosophical discourse, both of which were more driven by the identification of salient differences among people.” Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 290. Throughout this project, we will examine how authors such as Wollstonecraft, Brown, Shelley, and Bird continue to draw on Galenic (four-stages) theory to articulate a politics of indistinction in response to a growing postrevolutionary politics (and science) of distinction.

⁶⁴ It is not clear, at least in the earliest version of the *Essay*, that Smith realizes this. I argue that it takes Wollstonecraft to draw out the implications of Smith’s position that he might not necessarily embrace.

⁶⁵ The racial implications of these models in America will be discussed at greater length in the following chapter in the context of the 1793 yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia.

⁶⁶ Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 5:9.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 5:10.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 5:20.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 5:23.

⁷¹ Ibid., 5:10.

⁷² Ibid., 5:18.

⁷³ Ibid., 5:34.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 5:39.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 5:40.

⁷⁶ Wollstonecraft and Smith share a similarly boundless faith in reason, which is evident in their writings about education and human improvement. In *Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft makes it clear that human progress can only take place in a society which gives all people equal access to reason.

⁷⁷ Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 5:10-11.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 5:14.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 5:42.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 5:211.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 5:87.

⁸² In *Rights of Woman* we again see echoes of Smith's arguments about the effects of society on the constitution of man, particularly as Wollstonecraft discusses the effects of certain professions on the countenance of men. Wollstonecraft even borrows Smith's language on climate, although she uses it for more metaphorical purposes: "But, if from their birth men and women be placed in a torrid zone, with the meridian sun of pleasure darting directly upon them, how can they sufficiently brace their minds to discharge the duties of life?" Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 5:124.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁸⁴ Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 7:52.

⁸⁵ Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 6:20.

⁸⁶ Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 5:14.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 5:15.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 5:17.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 5:31.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5:33.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 5:45.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 5:46.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

⁹⁵ Which is why people like Burke seek the imposition of an outside form on the swinish multitude (matter)—order and hierarchy are beautiful to Burke because for him beauty needs strong forms. Deformity, on the other hand, conjures up an image of the masses having shaping power.

⁹⁶ Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 47.

⁹⁷ Wollstonecraft's emphasis on activity here raises an important question about the relationship between energy and structure, and one that will have implications on other authors in this project: namely Charles Brockden Brown and Mary Shelley. As we will see in Chapter 2, Brown depicts Edgar Huntly as active, energetic, and exertive. After he undergoes his transformation, he has a fantasy of speed and energy beyond animals; he feels pushed beyond human form by his increased capacity to access energy. As such, he appears to break the great chain of being. We see something similar in Shelley's *The Last Man*, in Adrian (who we're told has energy beyond his form), who is contrasted by the end of the novel with inactive statues and memorials. With this in mind, we might think about Gothic literature as a genre that rebels against neoclassical traditions (and their emphasis on models and structures) in favor of energy and boundlessness—making the Gothic a literature of indistinction. This mode of thought might also have something to say about Gothic representing females struggling against the structures of male power in this period—men like Burke being the architects of power—particularly in Wollstonecraft's writings.

⁹⁸ Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 5:51.

⁹⁹ In other words, here we see the indistinction of discourses that have become, in our own modern eyes, distinct. In this period, the distinctions between science, religion, and politics were less defined.

¹⁰⁰ Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 5:57.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 5:59.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 5:73.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 5:74.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 5:246.

¹⁰⁶ In other words, critics took her ideas and suggested even further implications than she was willing to admit (a move we have seen before in the ways she identified the political stakes of Smith's *Essay*). Here they do it to critique her; later in the dissertation, we will see others, like Brown, who follow out these implications—particularly in terms of indistinctions between humans and animals—to promote and valorize more radical political possibilities that more conservative thinkers could only critique.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Taylor, *Vindication of the Rights of Brutes* (London: Edward Jeffrey, 1792), 103.

¹⁰⁸ Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 74.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹¹¹ A good example of this in Smith's *Essay* can be found in his discussion of how climate changes the color and thickness of hair among humans and animals: "Climate possesses great and evident influence on the hair, not only of men, but of all other animals. The changes which this excrescence undergoes in them is at least equal to what it suffers in man. If, in one case these transmutations are acknowledged to be consistent with identity of kind, they ought not, in the other, to be esteemed criterions of distinct species. Nature hath adapted the pliancy of her work to the situations in which she may require it to be placed." Smith, *Essay* (1788), 49-50. Smith goes on to make comparisons between men of different nations and climates with different kinds of animals: particularly beavers, bears, horses, deer, and foxes.

¹¹² Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 5:126.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 5:136.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5:215.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5:240. This type of radical equality echoes the type of catholic education advocated by Smith and Benjamin Rush (although Smith himself was not always an open advocate for female education). Rush, on the other hand, openly called for female education—famously in *Thoughts on Female Education* (1787).

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5:245.

¹¹⁷ Wollstonecraft acknowledges the expected argument that women will be "unsexed" by these improvements through education: "Asserting the rights which women in common with men ought to contend for, I have not attempted to extenuate their faults; but to prove them to be the natural consequence of their education and station in society. [I]t is reasonable to suppose that they will change their character . . . when they are allowed to be free in a physical, moral, and civil sense." *Ibid.*, 266. Note the similarities between this quote and a similar quote by Smith found on page 7 of this chapter.

¹¹⁸ Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 6:6.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6:6-7.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 6:223.

¹²¹ Ibid., 6:226-227. The reference to phlegm here, which is one of the four humors, is another clear gesture to Wollstonecraft's Galenic understanding of medicine.

¹²² Ibid., 6:229.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ It is worth noting that this type of interdisciplinary harmony advocated by Smith and Wollstonecraft aligns nicely with Galenic ideals of balance in medicine.

¹²⁵ Noll, 101.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 6:231.

¹²⁸ Kraus, 20.

¹²⁹ Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 6:235. Note again this reference to the four humors, which once more highlights Wollstonecraft's Galenic leanings. This description will resonate later in the writings of Mary Shelley, who imagines both physical and political disease differently from a historical distance.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 6:7. Wollstonecraft also writes: "In life, an honest man with a confined understanding is frequently the slave of his habits and the dupe of his feelings, whilst the man with a clearer head and colder heart makes the passions of others bend to his interest; but truly sublime is the character that acts from principle, and governs the inferior springs of activity without slackening their vigour; whose feelings give vital heat to his resolves, but never hurry him into feverish eccentricities," 8. While still advocating for energy over structure, in her later writings Wollstonecraft also makes an argument here about how avoiding Gothic brutality has much to do with imagining the sublime as a non-feverish state.

CHAPTER 2

“IMMUNITY AND TRANSFORMATION”

Although much has been said about the similarities between Charles Brockden Brown and William Godwin—Brown himself acknowledged his literary debt to Godwin—we often forget that his first published work, *Alcuin: A Dialogue* (1798), has more in common with Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Woman* than the Gothic fictions of her husband. Indeed, when a version of *Alcuin* appeared in the *Weekly Magazine* it was titled “Rights of Women,” a shortened version of the title to Wollstonecraft’s treatise. *Alcuin*’s dialogue addresses many of the same issues discussed in my first chapter, including the unequal access to education for women and the ways in which women are treated much like animals in a patriarchal society. In *Alcuin*, Brown even imagines a utopian woman’s paradise—a society in which men and women are treated and educated equally—that demonstrates his awareness of the political potential of gender indistinction. Although Mrs. Carter ultimately backs away from *Alcuin*’s suggestion that marriage be abolished by the end of the text, it is clear that Brown, like Wollstonecraft, is interested in the possibilities of radical equality.

Brown also draws on similar arguments to make his appeal, demonstrating his own familiarity with the discourses on human plasticity put forth by thinkers such as Samuel Stanhope Smith. Early in the text, Mrs. Carter asks *Alcuin* if he believes “that the sexes are essentially equal.”¹ To that, *Alcuin* responds: “It appears to me, that human beings are moulded by the circumstances in which they are placed. In this they are all alike. The differences that flow from the sexual distinction, are as nothing in the balance.”² These arguments echo the claims put forth by both Smith and Wollstonecraft in their writings, that education and the state of society is capable of shaping humans and their abilities. Like Wollstonecraft, Brown turns this into an

argument for female education and attacks the “habits” of men that, as Mrs. Carter notes, for making “the circumstance of sex a reason for excluding one half of mankind from all those paths which lead to usefulness and honour.”³ *Alcuin*, then, becomes an American echo of Wollstonecraft’s arguments for gender indistinction.

Yet just as Wollstonecraft took the work of Smith beyond what he could imagine, I argue that Brown does similar things with Wollstonecraft’s politics of indistinction. Whereas *Alcuin* itself serves as an interesting text for examining gender indistinction, as Brown moves from *Alcuin* to his Gothic fiction, he explores more radical equalities that Wollstonecraft, perhaps, could not imagine. Building on the language of disease used by Burke and Wollstonecraft in Chapter 1, Brown examines what happens to human distinctions—especially race distinctions—when disease gets literalized (something we will also see in Chapter 3 with Mary Shelley). The first half of this chapter explores how the democratizing and leveling power of disease in Brown’s yellow fever novels contributes to a politics of distinction. In this section, Brown remains attentive to concerns about questions about social and political status, yet quickly moves beyond that standard Gothic narrative to further examine the politics of racial indistinction in the wake of the Haitian Revolution. The second half of this chapter looks at how *Edgar Huntly* takes this a step further to examine the possibility of species indistinction. By examining the possibility of indistinction between humans and animals, *Edgar Huntly* more explicitly frames this transition from a European Gothic to an American (and transatlantic) Gothic fiction.

ESTABLISHING A POLITICS OF IMMUNITY

In the fall of 1798, having noted that a “fatal pest has encompassed us and entered our own doors,” the aspiring novelist Brown lost his close friend—the poet and

physician Elihu Hubbard Smith—to a growing yellow fever epidemic in New York. A similar outbreak had plagued the city only three years prior, and the most devastating of these epidemics had driven Brown from his Philadelphia home in 1793. Having arranged for the burial of his friend, he departed from this “pestilential, desolate, and sultry city” and took up residence with the playwright William Dunlap in New Jersey; a month later he began writing *Ormond; or, The Secret Witness*.⁴ A sprawling narrative of conspiracy and contagion, *Ormond* was the first of Brown’s published novels to revisit the Philadelphia he knew in 1793: a community threatened not only by disease, but by the perceived collapse of established social, political, and racial hierarchies.⁵ By this time, Brown had spent three years working on *Arthur Mervyn; or, Memoirs of the Year 1793*, and he published both novels in 1798 as violent democratic revolutions in France and Saint Domingue made it seem necessary to contemplate how societies were bound together. As pestilent disease, uncontrolled immigration, and revolutionary energies threatened the capital of the young republic, the perceived immunities and increased mobility of foreign agents in Philadelphia led to fears of a nation susceptible to physical and ideational contagion.

Whereas literary scholars and historians have often dismissed *Ormond* for Brown’s better-known *Arthur Mervyn*, this “brilliantly bungled book” offers a striking commentary on the power of contagionist discourse to construct alternative codes of belonging in the early republic.⁶ Some critics have demonstrated a growing interest in the formative yellow fever chapters of *Ormond*, yet few scholars have succeeded in bringing the text into a larger conversation with *Arthur Mervyn*. In the following sections, I do just that, underscoring what philosopher Roberto Esposito has called “the immunitary semantics at the center of modern self-representation” by examining how discourses of immunity alter the biopolitical landscape of Philadelphia in the

1790s.⁷ With an increased focus on the intersection of literature and medicine, contagion has become something of a scholarly buzzword in early American studies: it serves metaphorically to demarcate the postcolonial other, demonstrates the transmissibility of revolutionary rhetoric, highlights the instability of republican government, and embodies fears of racial mixture. As such, I want to shift the emphasis from a discourse of contagion (often associated with a fear of the foreign) to a discourse of immunity (a fear associated with foreign immunities) in order to demonstrate a more affirmative politics in Brown's Gothic that can emerge only after deconstructing the intersection of biology and politics in this period.

Brown complicates early American medical narratives by positioning contagion—in the words of Priscilla Wald—as “more than an epidemiological fact.”⁸ Wald argues instead that contagion is “a foundational concept in the study of religion and society, with a long history of explaining how beliefs circulate in social interactions” and notes, “the interactions that make us sick also constitute us as a community.”⁹ She recognizes that narratives have social consequences; as authors imagine (and *reimagine*) the threat of an outbreak, they disseminate information and shape how communities respond to and experience disease. Esposito offers a variation of Wald's argument by arguing that immunities also constitute us as a community. Esposito claims, “*immunitas* is inscribed in the reverse logic of *communitas*: immune is the ‘non-being’ or the ‘not-having’ anything in common,” and notes, “it is precisely such a negative implication with its contrary that indicates that the concept of immunization presupposes that which it also negates.”¹⁰ For Brown, the yellow fever epidemic exposes pockets of non-being within the community as non-citizens gain mobility and access to society through a perceived resistance to disease.

Although Wald and Esposito are primarily interested in twentieth-century biopolitical questions, their writings also provide a rewarding approach to reading the outbreak narratives of the 1790s. For Wald, outbreak narratives offer a striking commentary on the transmission of bodies and ideas in society:

[Contagion] means literally “to touch together,” and one of its earliest usages in the fourteenth century referred to the circulation of ideas and attitudes. Revolutionary ideas were contagious, as were heretical beliefs and practices. The circulation of disease and the circulation of ideas were material and experiential, even if not visible. Both . . . demonstrated the simultaneous fragility and tenacity of social bonds.¹¹

This etymological reading is well suited to Brown’s novels, particularly *Ormond*. As Brown’s narratives of *conspiracy* (literally “to breathe together”) are subtended by an emergent discourse of *contagion* (literally “to touch together”), they produce a complex language capable of responding to the material and social experiences of a politically charged and epidemical community. Yet I find Wald most provocative not for her reading of contagion, but for her exploration of socially constructed immunities—or “epidemiologies of belonging”—that are shaped by real and perceived resistance to disease. In order to articulate how Brown’s outbreak narratives help construct a politics of indistinction, I borrow Wald’s “imagined immunities” (with all the weight of her gesture to Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*) to push against the critical tendency to merely pathologize contagion. Instead, I argue that perceived immunities to both disease and republican thought in Brown’s novels open up the liberatory possibility of an immunological citizenship defined by exemption from disease.¹²

SYMPTOMS OF TERROR IN THE NEW REPUBLIC

Ormond opens with the narrative of Mr. Dudley, a wealthy merchant deceived by his young business partner. Brown introduces a rhetoric of contagion early in the text, noting that Dudley's wife "caught the infection" of melancholy from her husband and "there was no remedy" for Dudley's initial suspicions toward his partner. The fall of Dudley intertwines disease and social circumstances: his frame is no longer "exempt from infirmity" and his moral character displays similar "symptoms of this depravity." Newly impoverished, Dudley's injured pride leads him to move his family from Baltimore to Philadelphia where poverty and an outbreak of yellow fever make it impossible to leave.¹³ He loses his wife and his vision, and becomes completely dependent upon his daughter Constantia: an industrious, chaste, and educated republican woman [American version of classic Gothic narrative of lost status?]. Constantia refuses to marry impetuously in order to improve her situation, relying instead on the language of illness to describe ill-placed love as a malady that is only "curable" with time and reason. To Constantia, love is a disease that must be treated and overcome alongside the "infirmities of sex and age" that challenge her efforts to care for her father.¹⁴ Physically and economically confined, Constantia's story becomes one of perpetual contact and contagion. She is a figure constantly threatened by transgressive persons and their dangerous narratives.

Rooted in the political rhetoric of the 1790s, the historical backdrop to Constantia's narrative is one of intense political debates. As Catherine O'Donnell Kaplan notes, this was a period in American history when "political responsibilities seemed to subsume all other duties, political speech to drown out all other communication," and fears of widespread political unrest emerged even before the first case of yellow fever was reported in 1793.¹⁵ American support for France was of

particular consequence, as the French found themselves simultaneously at war with Britain, Holland, Spain, and Austria. Although French support had made it possible for Washington to force a British surrender at Yorktown, the new president proclaimed neutrality on behalf of the United States, sparking a series of public and private debates. Tensions increased in April with the arrival of the French republic's new minister, Edmond Charles Genêt, who demanded war with England and garnered public support as he traveled from Charleston to Philadelphia. French sympathies heightened again as thousands of refugees fled slave rebellions in Saint Domingue in July. Political intensities led John Adams to proclaim a "French madness." Years later he would argue that only the yellow fever had saved the nation from political disaster:

You certainly never felt the terrorism excited by Genet in 1793, when ten thousand people in the streets of Philadelphia . . . threatened to drag Washington out of his house and effect a revolution in the government, or compel it to declare war in favor of the French Revolution and against England. The coolest and the firmest minds . . . have given their opinions to me that nothing but the yellow fever . . . could have saved the United States from a total revolution of government.¹⁶

Yet as Brown wrote *Ormond* in 1798, the political landscape hadn't much improved. John Robinson's *Proofs of a Conspiracy* was published amidst fears of secret societies, revolutionary violence escalated across the Atlantic, and Adams signed the Alien and Sedition Acts to protect the republic from malicious writings and alien enemies.

Such fears, however, were no longer limited to politics. The gathering of the College of Physicians by Mayor Clarkson in 1793 marked the first time in American history that the government had appealed to an organized medical society for assistance and by 1797 the nation's first medical journal was being published by

Elihu Hubbard Smith in New York. Fierce medical debates emerged in 1793 as physicians divided themselves into two camps: *climatists* claimed that yellow fever was the result of miasmatic vapors rising from the filth of the city, while *contagionists* argued it was an infectious disease imported from the West Indies. So prevalent were these debates that by 1795 Brown's friend Elihu Hubbard Smith found it impossible to avoid the incessant "fever talk" around him: "Fever is the invariable and unceasing topic of conversation. When two persons meet, the Fever is the subject of the first inquiries. People collect in groups to talk it over and to frighten each other into fever, or flight."¹⁷ Despite Kaplan's claim that all speech in this period was subsumed in political debate, Smith's concerns and a sharp increase in publications on the fever spoke to the rising importance of medical discourse in the 1790s. Climatist and contagionist positions often played to the major ideological camps of the early republic, making it difficult to distinguish between medical and political discourse—especially as contagionists sought to restrict the influx of immigrants from Saint Domingue.¹⁸

Brown did not share these medical convictions, and instead viewed the yellow fever as a disease whose origin and transmission would remain mysterious. In a footnote to his translation of C. F. Volney's *View of the Soil*, Brown outright rejects both camps: "Why, exclaims one, did not the equal or greater filth and impurity of our towns generate the fever before 1790? And why, may another exclaim, did not our intercourse with the West Indies import that disease sooner?"¹⁹ Brown was unconvinced that science could speak with certainty on the transmission and treatment of yellow fever, and instead turned to literature in order to explore the social consequences of disease in a time of heightened political anxiety. In his preface to *Arthur Mervyn*, Brown reflects on the singularity of this period by noting that "the evils of pestilence by which this city has lately been afflicted will probably form an æra in

its history,” yet also recognizes the futility of consigning this shared experience to scientific and historical scrutiny. Distancing his work from that of the “physician and political economist,” Brown instead fashions himself a “moral observer” whose authorial gaze rests not on the physical effects of disease, but on the “new displays of the influence of human passions and motives” which result from a “change in manners and population.”²⁰ As such, Brown finds himself crossing disciplinary boundaries much like Smith and Wollstonecraft did as they worked to bring together science, religion, race, and politics. Brown would later reflect on how texts both construct and reflect meaning within a society by arguing, “the narration of public events, with a certain license of invention, was the most efficacious of moral instruments.”²¹ As increasingly diverse and shifting populations challenged the nation’s social structures, Brown sought a cultural diagnosis through Gothic fiction.

Brown’s disinterest in a purely medical account can be seen in his earliest descriptions of the fever in *Ormond*, which are devoid of physical details and instead explore the social consequences of the disease. As Constantia walks the streets of Philadelphia upon the death of a friend, she observes in those around her “the symptoms of terror with which all ranks appeared to be seized . . . there were few passengers whose countenances did not betray alarm.”²² Written at a distance of only five years, Brown’s reference to “terror” evokes images of “the Terror” that erupted in France weeks after the first yellow fever outbreak in Philadelphia. Brown more explicitly references “the Terror” later in the text as Martinette—an exiled French revolutionary—narrates her escape from the “sanguinary tyranny of Robespierre” to a shuddering Constantia.²³ As “moral observer,” Brown becomes diagnostician of the social and cultural symptoms of the epidemic. Through Constantia he speaks to a growing national fear of political insurrection and unstable communities.²⁴

Constantia's early recognition of these "symptoms of terror" foreshadows her later meetings with Martinette and reveals a fragmented American political consciousness that celebrated an ideology of freedom yet feared the potential consequences: an American "Terror" like that in France or a violent pursuit of citizenship as seen in Saint Domingue. Brown remained publicly skeptical of these anxieties, yet he was unable—or perhaps unwilling—to transcend such fears in his fiction.

CONSTRUCTING IMAGINED IMMUNITIES

Even as he affirms the danger of foreign influence on Constantia, Brown uses Martinette's commentary on Robespierre as an indictment of fearing the foreign. Despite his published support of black resistance in Saint Domingue, Brown betrays his own republican uncertainties as he imagines a free republic in which non-citizens (or "non-beings") gain rights through violence and immunity. Brown's interest in the epidemic is perhaps best understood by looking at the Greek roots of the term *epidemios*. Whereas *nosos* was the term for the disease, *epidemios* was initially used to reference to a country, a people, or a home: all which describe human beings socially bound together. Before Hippocrates used the term to describe diseases themselves, *epidemios* referred to persons who chose to reside in a given country. Brown's novels imagine epidemics as more than the physical presence of fever; epidemics also mark the arrival and ongoing presence of non-citizens whose perceived immunities permit them to stay—thus rendering indistinct the boundaries of both nations and citizens. These non-citizens are not simply immune to disease, but to the prevalent republican ideologies of the period. Brown's narratives of emergent immunological citizenship move beyond traditional medical discourse to explore the exigency and danger of bodies in contact in the early Atlantic world.

Constantia's first physical encounter with a feverish body comes as she attempts to nurse a sick neighbor against her father's wishes. As her friend perishes, Constantia notices that this "house and her own were opposite each other and not connected with any on the same side. A narrow space divided them, and her own chamber was within the sphere of contagion." Suddenly aware of the vulnerability of this space (here disease makes even physical and spatial boundaries ineffective) she struggles to "stifle the conviction that some mortal sickness had seized upon her own frame" and grapples with the "anxieties of head and stomach"; she recognizes the need to remove herself—both physically and mentally—from the perils of contagion.²⁵ Later, a character named Baxter experiences similar "anxieties of the head" with less fortunate consequences. Although "Baxter had a notion that Frenchmen were exempt from this disease," upon hearing rumors that a French neighbor has died, he perches himself outside his house to witness the burial. Like Constantia, his fears heightened as "he reflected how near he might now be to the source of infection," yet "some fascination had forbidden him to recede." The corpse falls from its wrappings and Baxter flees the scene in fright only to perish of the fever himself shortly thereafter. Brown attributes Baxter's death to a "force of imagination," noting, "he had probably already received, through the medium of the air, or by contact of which he was not conscious, the seeds of this disease. They might perhaps have lain dormant, had not this panic occurred to endow them with activity."²⁶ The physical transmission of disease is of little consequence, yet Baxter's panic-stricken mind proves fatal. In placing unfounded fears alongside tangible dangers, Brown emphasizes the interrelatedness of the imagination and one's physical well-being.

The threat of these "imagined immunities" is most apparent in conversations that take place between Constantia and Martinette. Wondering how Martinette

survived alone in the streets during the epidemic, Constantia is shocked at the Frenchwoman's response: "Hast thou forgotten that there were . . . at least ten thousand French in this city, fugitives from Marat and from St. Domingo? That they lived in utter fearlessness of the reigning disease,—sung and loitered in the public walks, and prattled at their doors with all their customary unconcern?"²⁷ Exiled French revolutionaries induce fear in *Ormond* for their perceived immunities, a claim also leveled against blacks in *Arthur Mervyn* who cared for the sick and buried the dead. That non-citizens could move freely through the nation's temporary capital, inoculated against pestilence and violence by their racial constitutions and revolutionary ideals, threatened to undermine established hierarchies. These immunities allowed for the circulation of ideas considered pervasive and contagious. Foreign influences had "infiltrated" the city and formed communities with no regard for the dangers of yellow fever, marking a significant intersection of conspiratorial and contagionist fears in the novel. Robert Levine notes, "Constantia is surprised to learn that [Martinette] had found immediate refuge with her compatriots, 'fugitives from Marat and from St. Domingo,' who somewhat threateningly form a secretive subcommunity within Philadelphia."²⁸ Martinette's "customary unconcern" provides increased mobility across racial, political, and moral boundaries during the epidemic. Whereas Wald argues that the outbreak narrative "articulates community on a national scale, as it identifies the health and well-being of those legally within the borders of the state and its worthy representatives," Brown's novel acknowledges an eighteenth-century fear—one that is perhaps most pronounced in Burke's writings—that these changing social and political formations, or "varieties of untried being," might irreversibly alter established forms of national belonging.²⁹

Blacks experienced a similar mobility during the epidemic. As contemporary accounts of the yellow fever epidemic often read the efforts of Philadelphia blacks as a community of free blacks serving some “national” interest, the simultaneous perception of blacks as contagious agents and inoculated carriers of disease served to further marginalize them as a community. Although for years slaveholders had recognized the value of a “seasoned” slave—one inoculated against new world diseases through previous exposure—prominent physicians like Rush continued to make inaccurate claims that blacks were immune to yellow fever, demonstrating how blacks could be perceived as susceptible to disease (they need to be “seasoned”) and immune at the same time. Calling on the black community for assistance as a result of this perceived immunity, Rush put the city in what Philip Gould has called “the awkward position of asking non-citizens to act like ideal citizens” and placed an established white society into a morally and economically dependent relationship with the black community.³⁰ Claims of black immunity also forced the young republic to acknowledge the unspoken reality of miscegenation as prominent figures like Thomas Jefferson began to question whether this immunity existed only in “pure blacks” but not those of mixed race. Prevailing concerns that French merchants and free blacks were advancing their own interests during the epidemic by charging exorbitant wages or plundering deserted houses mapped too easily onto stories of “the Terror” in France and stories of newly-liberated blacks violently asserting power in Saint Domingue. The residents who remained in Philadelphia often watched in fear as fellow citizens were carried off by black carters to likely perish at Bush Hill, the French-run hospital on the outskirts of the city. The image of blacks publicly burying the dead brings together the worlds of revolution and disease, with Martinette asking late in the novel: “What are bleeding wounds and mangled corpses, when accustomed to the daily sight of

them for years?”³¹ Hardened by the experiences of violence and disease, Martinette blurs the distinction between casualties of war and victims of the fever, and between quarantine and exile. “Seasoned” by war and pestilence, these non-citizens were able to establish networks of communication and move about with relative freedom.

These shifts between mobility and immobility are similarly experienced by Constantia, as she resists physical and economic confinement and crosses—albeit uncomfortably—a number of social and political boundaries. Brown reads the prospects of a fledgling nation through her experience, as Constantia is forced to break with class and gender standards in order to support herself and her family, while also protecting her republican and “womanly” virtue amidst growing national fears of political and physical contagion. Yet the issue of inviolate space—or virtue—is not limited to questions of physical intrusion; as Robert Levine has argued, the figure of Constantia represents an American who is also constantly seeking safety from the “revolutionary energies” (and well-known Gothic tropes) of the period: specifically Ormond’s sexuality and Martinette’s savagery.³² Attempting to wait in safety prior to departing for Europe, for example, Constantia quarantines herself within an old family home only to find herself again threatened by the conspiratorial presence of Ormond and nearly raped. Trapped in a state of perpetual vulnerability, her need to flee the revolutionary energies of America reflects a trope that can also be seen in the title character of *Arthur Mervyn*, and Clara, the protagonist of Brown’s *Wieland*. As he explores the possibilities of an inviolate republic, Brown often removes his characters from America altogether; those who stay do so at their own peril.

At no point is the fear of contaminated space as pronounced as in Constantia’s early experience nursing her neighbor, Mary Whiston. In an attempt to diagnose the scenes around her, Constantia assumes that the fever infiltrated the Whiston

household as a “malignant vapour” from some neglected corpse left outside. Her awareness of the vulnerability of space and her assertion that she lives within a sphere of contagion are both ultimately prompted by fears that the spread of the disease is airborne; Constantia attributes the death of a nearby family to “the tainted atmosphere around them.”³³ Believing contamination to spread through the atmosphere—a belief common to the period—Constantia worries that contagions will be transmitted across physical and spatial boundaries. Her fear of being physically and politically violated at the hands of Ormond and Martinette near the end of the novel takes on a similar form. The final scene between Constantia and Ormond, in fact, takes place behind locked doors and in the presence of another corpse: a contaminated and conspiratorial space from which Constantia cannot escape inviolate. Frightened she might conspire with the “yellow and haggard visage” of her dead neighbor as she nurses Whiston, Constantia perceives not only physical illness but also her own diseased mind.³⁴ She recognizes the need to resist her imagined fears and remove herself—physically and mentally—from the perils of contagion.

SPECTERS OF SAINT DOMINGUE

Constantia recovers from this moment of crisis as she hears the passing sounds of a hearse in the middle of the night and breaks from her troubled reverie long enough to make arrangements for the removal of Mary Whiston’s body. The sources of Constantia’s relief are “two men, negroes, who listened to her tale with respect,” one of only a few direct references made to race in the entire novel.³⁵ Read alongside his later political writings, this scene is often seen as an attempt by Brown to defend the humanity of black volunteers. In his essay, “On the Consequences of Abolishing the Slave Trade to the West Indian Colonies,” he refers to slavery as “the grandest and

most cruel experiment that ever was tried upon human nature,” and later argues that “this spectacle ought to teach us the effects of circumstances upon the human faculties, and prescribe bounds to that arrogance, which would confine to one race, the characteristics of the species.”³⁶ Convinced that the perceived inferiority of blacks was the result of circumstance rather than natural or inherent deficiencies, Brown argues that the violence in Saint Domingue was the necessary result of a corrupt system of slavery. Sophia describes one man—a “wood-carter” known previously to Constantia and her father—as being “gentle and obliging,” and remarks that “his old occupation being laid aside for a time, he had betaken himself, like many others of his colour and rank, to the conveyance and burial of the dead.” This carter alleviates Constantia’s despair by kindly agreeing to return later that evening to dispose of the corpse, and Constantia learns the next morning that the man had “faithfully performed his promise, the dead body having disappeared.”³⁷ As the perceived threat of West Indian immigrants loomed large during the epidemic years, Brown’s depiction of faithful blacks certainly invites a reading of the text that is sympathetic to the plight of free blacks and slaves in Philadelphia.

Brown’s explicit references to race in *Ormond* and *Arthur Mervyn* are few, and he often avoids racial descriptions altogether. Still, the question of race is far from irrelevant in his novels, and his reference to faithful black carters is especially pertinent in light of the controversial remarks made by publisher Mathew Carey in 1793. Near the end of the first epidemic, Carey was responsible for writing several editions of his short account, or “instant history,” of the yellow fever outbreak: a text known best for its claim that “the great demand for nurses afforded an opportunity for imposition, which was eagerly seized by some of the vilest of blacks. They extorted two, three, four, even five dollars a night for attendance, which would have been well paid

by a single dollar. Some of them were even detected in plundering the houses of the sick.”³⁸ This accusation from a man like Carey highlights the complexities of race relationships in this period, and draws attention to the instability of racialized hierarchies in the 1790s. A response to Carey’s assertion was published in 1794 by Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, elders of the local church and leaders of the Free African Society. While acknowledging that Carey had singled them out individually for their service during the epidemic, Jones and Allen claimed that “by naming us he leaves these others in the hazardous state of being classed with those who are called the vilest.”³⁹ Jones and Allen acknowledged that extortion was commonplace in the city, but argued that it existed across racial boundaries and rebuked Carey for his accusations of black opportunism. Carey was confused by this response, for he considered himself “a dedicated republican, with seemingly impeccable antislavery credentials,” and later editions included a footnote acknowledging white opportunism as well.⁴⁰ By publishing a series of small narratives about black service—narratives that bear a strong resemblance to Brown’s depiction of negro carters published in *Ormond*—Absalom Jones and Richard Allen offered a counter-perspective to the perceived breakdown of social and racial hierarchies as described by Carey.

Although Carey’s initial indictment makes no specific reference to the recent influx of black servants from Saint Domingue or to the growing fears of violence in the West Indies, it would have been impossible for him—or Jones and Allen, for that matter—to ignore their increased presence in the midst of an epidemic. In a recent essay on *Arthur Mervyn*, Sean X. Goudie has argued that Jones and Allen also “invoke the specter of West Indian rebellion” in their narrative, but that they “do so in order to justify urgent appeals to their white audience for the emancipation and full integration of black slaves.”⁴¹ Nor were whites the only people to believe that blacks were immune

to the disease, as seen in Richard Allen's claim that free blacks had a special obligation as they had been granted exemption from the disease by God. Regardless, it would have been impossible to ignore the increased mobility and public presence of the black community, for "the whole city watched them every day as they made their rounds, every night as they drove the dead carts. And, of course, the city shunned them as infected, vilified them as predatory."⁴² As arguments intensified in the United States and throughout the Atlantic world regarding the violence in Saint Domingue—abolitionists praising the black uprising and opponents criticizing the rebellion for its violence and its impact on commerce—reports of looting and black opportunism fueled racial tensions throughout Philadelphia. Black servants often experienced sudden and unexpected freedom as their masters perished, and many found themselves in a situation similar to that of the Dudleys: impoverished and unable to evacuate the city.

Brown, like Carey, had "impeccable antislavery credentials," but we should be similarly careful not to overlook the complex racial consciousness that informed his work. As Goudie claims, the arrival of black servants and French refugees in Philadelphia exposed "repressed unpleasant thoughts about slavery, rebellion, and the nation's foundational institutions" and Americans "found it necessary to reexamine these things" as the yellow fever disrupted the established order.⁴³ A most telling example of repression and reexamination can be seen at the height of the yellow fever epidemic in Brown's other outbreak narrative, *Arthur Mervyn*. As Arthur—sick with the yellow fever himself—enters the former habitation of a friend, he finds himself hovering over an unknown dying man. He looks around and notices "traces of pillage" and concludes that "some casual or mercenary attendant, had not only contributed to hasten the death of the patient, but had rifled his property and fled."⁴⁴ At this moment, Arthur is struck by "a ghostly, renegade West Indian 'servant' at the height of the

yellow fever epidemic” and Brown literally raises the “specter” of violence in the West Indies as Arthur is knocked senseless by an “apparition.”⁴⁵

Unlike the humble and faithful black carter in *Ormond*, the West Indian servant of *Arthur Mervyn* is described as having “one eye, a scar upon his cheek, a tawny skin, [and] a form grotesquely misproportioned.” Arthur is frightened by this brief vision of the mulatto, for, “to perceive, to fear, and to confront this apparition were blended into one sentiment. I turned towards him with the swiftness of lightning, but my speed was useless to my safety.” Like the West Indian servant, the yellow fever is also ghostly—an invisible and unrecognizable presence in the atmosphere—and Arthur is overcome with the fever only moments before his assault. Arthur is conscious of being infected and claims that “a vapour, infectious and deadly, assailed my senses. . . . I seemed not so much to smell as to taste the element that now encompassed me. I felt as if I had inhaled a poisonous and subtle fluid, whose power instantly bereft my stomach of all vigour.”⁴⁶ Simultaneously assaulted by disease and violence, Arthur is discovered unconscious in the street and narrowly escapes being buried alive by carters or consigned to the contaminated space of Bush Hill. If the black carter of *Ormond* acknowledges the humanity of blacks in Philadelphia in 1793, the mulatto in *Arthur Mervyn* reveals Brown’s “repressed unpleasant thoughts” and his unfixed stance on issues of race and rebellion in this period.

Concerns about the influx of West Indian immigrants, however, were not limited to fears of servants and black uprisings.⁴⁷ Although Brown makes the Philadelphia of 1793 an important site for his novels, both *Arthur Mervyn* and *Ormond* were written years later as French sympathies lessened. Near the end of *Arthur Mervyn*, Arthur’s travels put him in contact with a Frenchman and his performing monkey, in which the Frenchman yells: “Tenez! Dominique! Prenez garde! Diable noir!” which translates into

“Stop! Dominique! Mind you! Black devil!”⁴⁸ By representing the Frenchman as the master of this ill-behaved “beast” the novel doesn’t merely reinforce a racialized hierarchy, but subtly assigns responsibility for this behavior to the French. Brown takes this move a step further in *Ormond* by explicitly separating the French immigrants from their black servants or the free blacks in Philadelphia; in *Ormond* it is the French who are dangerous and savage, a move that perhaps undermines the significance of racial contagion and instead emphasizes fears of pervasive political discourse and revolutionary ideologies among the French. This reading helps situate the narrative within the context of 1798, a period in which Michael Drexler argues “the so-called Quasi-War with France had the effect of severing associations of the rebellion in Saint Domingue and the French Revolution.”⁴⁹ In *Ormond*, Brown not only severs this association, but also transfers many of the prevalent fears and anxieties toward blacks to the French. Indeed, the prevailing fear seems to be that blacks and the French are rendered indistinct from others.

French exiles are particularly threatening figures not only for their immunity to disease but also their exposure to revolutionary activities and ideals. This is seen clearly in the woman Baxter believes to be a helpless Frenchman’s daughter, later identified as Ormond’s sister Martinette. Like so many of Brown’s characters, Martinette is not what she appears. Baxter initially believes that she is a Frenchwoman unable to speak English, while Constantia assumes that she is simply a well-traveled American. Her personal narrative as a cross-dressing revolutionary militant from France, therefore, excites both curiosity and fear in Constantia when they meet. Extolling the virtues of a “liberty inviolate” and claiming that “liberty without peril can never exist” against the backdrop of the French Revolution and slave revolts in Saint Domingue, Martinette epitomizes growing concerns in the United

States over the potential consequences of a truly free republic.⁵⁰ The narratives of her travels and revolutionary philosophies gesture toward a contagion of liberty that might infect the young republic and demand violence to uphold its ideals, and Martinette invokes the specter of revolution by actively promoting the transmission of such violent ideals to Constantia. Levine notes that “as Martinette continues to relate her life story she seems increasingly monstrous, an itinerant revolutionary whose character is determined and shaped almost entirely by the unloosed revolutionary energies of the age.”⁵¹ Born of a Greek and a Ragusan, an orphan, and a traveler, Martinette represents the revolutionary atmosphere of the period and the dangers of increasingly mobile women who have been tainted—in her words—by “a mere passion for war” and “the contagion of example.”⁵²

Martinette’s mobility is contrasted sharply with the initial immobility of Constantia as seen at the outset of the novel. Reduced to poverty through an act of deceit, Constantia is driven out of the established community within which she was raised and unable to remove herself from the material experience of the epidemic. With all other societal bonds drawn from her, she is confronted not only by dire physical and imaginary threats of pestilence, but also the need to interact with foreign influences. In this state she meets up with black carters, the revolutionary Martinette, and the conspiratorial political philosophies of Ormond. Her father is initially described as one who “passed his time without much regard to futurity, being too well satisfied with the present to anticipate a change,” but his resistance to change eventually places Constantia in a position to feel threatened by an increasingly diverse and shifting community.⁵³ The yellow fever epidemic becomes a great social and political leveler, and ultimately portends other threats of equality being circulated through political movements occurring within and beyond the United States. Perhaps

Brown sees in the collapsing hierarchies of a society built on principles of freedom nothing more than a space susceptible to physical and ideational contagion. Despite various attempts to relocate, Constantia eventually concludes that there is no place where freedom is immune to contamination. The problem of freedom—as seen in a figure like Martinette—lies in its vulnerability to conspiracy and contagion; it cannot be obtained or sustained without physical and political casualties. The “imagined immunity” of exiled French revolutionaries and free blacks lead Brown to imagine alternative models of community while also exposing fears that violent revolution will be perpetual—and inevitable—occurrences in a nation built upon principles of freedom.

CONSPIRACY AND CONTAGION

Although Martinette is perhaps the most explicitly dangerous figure in the text, the threat of increased mobility reaches its height in her brother, Ormond. As Levine argues, “during the 1790s the fever was regularly portrayed as a duplicitous form of foreign infiltration and subversion,” and comparisons between Ormond and the disease are telling.⁵⁴ A member of the Bavarian Illuminati, a well-traveled soldier, and a political revolutionary, we are told Ormond’s “projects” will “likely possess an extensive influence on the future condition of this Western World.”⁵⁵ Sophia—Constantia’s friend and the narrator of *Ormond*, opens her letter to I. E. Rosenberg by acknowledging, “Ormond will, perhaps, appear to you a contradictory or unintelligible,” although she assures us that “he is not a creature of fancy.” Ormond’s fictionality is tied to uniquely American circumstances as Sophia writes, “the modes of life, the influence of public events upon the character and happiness of individuals, in America, are new to you.”⁵⁶ For Brown, Ormond emerges as a unique byproduct of the historical and social landscape of the 1790s. In a period of deep political anxiety in the United

States (and Philadelphia in particular), his presence points to a distinctly American cultural imagination capable of entertaining wildly contradictory figures; his contradictions spoke to their own conflicted social experiences. Indeed, like many of Brown's villains, Ormond fled Europe under questionable circumstances and eventually took up residence in America, reinforcing concerns that foreign agents were conspiring against the United States. In his conversations with Constantia,

He did not hide from her . . . that he had found service and promotion in the armies of Potemkin and Romanzow; that he had executed secret and diplomatic functions at Constantinople and Berlin; that in the latter city he had met with schemers and reasoners who aimed at the new-modelling of the world, and the subversion of all that has hitherto been conceived elementary and fundamental in the constitution of man and of government; that some of those reformers had secretly united to break down the military and monarchical fabric of German policy; that others, more wisely, had devoted their secret efforts, not to overturn, but to build; that, for this end, they embraced an exploring and colonizing project; that he had allied himself to these, and for the promotion of their projects had spent six years of his life in journeys by sea and land, in tracts unfrequented till then by any European.⁵⁷

Sophia also recounts the story of a Russian soldier who violently murders a fellow soldier in order to rape and then kill this fellow soldier's young lover. In an attempt to expiate his guilt the next day, the soldier rushes alone into a group of Turkish foragers, bringing away five heads and offering them on the grave of his friend as an act of penance. "This youth was Ormond," notes Sophia, "and such is a specimen of his exploits during a military career of eight years, in a warfare the most savage and

implacable.”⁵⁸ In the course of the novel, he is also indirectly responsible for the early death of a woman whose prospects of marriage he removed and threatens to rape Constantia, demonstrating a complete disregard for established moral or legal codes.

This disregard is made possible by Ormond’s ability to assume multiple identities, an act of political and social indistinction and a trait common to the villains of Brown’s fiction. Levine has observed, “rationalistic, artful, and un-American, Brown’s villains raise dark questions indeed about the futurity of a republic wherein ‘emigrants’ can theatrically fabricate identities as ‘Americans,’ all the while cloaking their origins, politics, and agendas.”⁵⁹ Martinette’s fluency in multiple languages and her ability to cross-dress in order to fight for her revolutionary ideals is just one example of such a fabrication. Yet Ormond does more than simply masquerade as an “American” citizen, choosing instead to spy on Constantia by impersonating a black servant (an act of making himself racially indistinct). His disguise makes him invisible, immune, and mobile: a non-citizen, or non-being. This transformation jeopardizes the organizing hierarchies of early American society. Ormond violates racial and moral boundaries as he travels unseen into the uncontaminated space of a virtuous republican woman, an obvious stand-in for the republic itself. Ormond’s visit in blackface, like the West Indian assault in *Arthur Mervyn*, offers a spectral reminder of the dangers of this historical moment: as Constantia finds herself plagued by malignant vapors, an “apparition”—the black, unseen Ormond—enters.

Ormond opens with Constantia pondering questions of suicide and honor, and of physical and social death. Her commentary serves to frame the novel, and similar thoughts resurface in her final scenes with Ormond:

If thought degenerate into a vehicle of pain, what remains but to destroy that vehicle? For this end death is the obvious, but not the only, or,

morally speaking, the worst, means. There is one method of obtaining the bliss of forgetfulness, in comparison with which suicide is innocent.⁶⁰

Frustrated in his attempts to contaminate Constantia with his political ideals, Ormond ignores her suicidal threats and conspires to rape her—dead or alive. Here we see that even the distinction between life and death gets blurred. Ormond's actions demonstrate that questions of life and death are never merely physical: they are also social and political. He warns Constantia not to give up her life over the imaginary contagion of honor, yet demonstrates his own disregard for her life by instructing her to “die with the guilt of suicide and the brand of cowardice upon thy memory, or live with thy claims to felicity and approbation undiminished. Thy decision is of moment to thyself, but of none to me. Living or dead, the prize that I have in view shall be mine.”⁶¹ Unaffected by her pleas for life and liberty, his actions underscore Sophia's earlier claim that in times of revolution and epidemic “human life is momentous and trivial in our eyes, according to the course which our habits and opinions have taken.”⁶² Like Martinette, Ormond's indifference to mortality and violence asks the important biopolitical question of who has power to regulate or negate life.

Arthur Mervyn also struggles with these questions—initially confusing his mulatto assailant for a corpse and then nearly being buried alive—yet Ormond is less interested in the distinction between life and death: his prolonged exposure to violence and disease makes life physically and politically inconsequential. Constantia is only able to preserve her personal freedom through violence, opting to preserve her liberty at all costs. In essence she must decide to perish or become Martinette; she ultimately chooses to preserve her liberty even if the attempt proves fatal. Constantia's struggle against Ormond speaks to the struggle of a young republic attempting to maintain an ideology of freedom, yet fearful that a republican philosophy will result in the same

violence and hierarchical collapse being witnessed abroad. Here *Ormond* becomes a narrative of political possibility that is both liberatory and fearful. Although Constantia manages to survive the yellow fever epidemic without resorting to suicide, we are given no indication that she ever recovers from the political machinations of Ormond.

For others, however the changing dynamics of this period still held political promise; Brown's novels also reflect the sentiments of those who claimed immunity from the fever. Richard Allen and Absalom Jones believed immunity to be a gift from God, one that might lead to abolition and equal black citizenship. Brown's writings also echo the sentiments of Stephen Girard, the French merchant who took over the operations at Bush Hill, who noted that Americans died much easier than the French. Girard speculated that Philadelphia would soon have nothing but Frenchmen left, and, like Martinette, he demonstrated an "utter fearlessness" by moving freely about the city. More importantly, Brown's vision prefaced that of a former West African slave, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, as he spoke to his troops in Saint Domingue three years after Brown published his novels. Dessalines set forth a more explicit vision of immunological citizenship, claiming that "the whites will fight well at first, but soon they will fall sick and die like flies. Then I will make you independent. Then there will be no more whites among us."⁶³ Dessalines' prophecy was partially fulfilled. When he declared Haitian independence in 1804, citizenship came with a price. Standing on the ashes of a country torn by war and pestilence, he claimed independence only after Saint Domingue had been deemed too hostile and infectious for white citizens.

Brown's fictional experiment with unrestricted freedom and its consequences in a period of democratic revolutions demonstrates a capacity to imagine outcomes like those in Haiti. Brown had been displaced by the fever. He had witnessed the removal of Washington and the federal government to Germantown—another politically

charged site. He acknowledged that physical destruction and social vulnerability often accompanied the pursuit of freedom; liberty was unsustainable without physical and political casualties. Yet, despite these concerns, Brown refuses simply to pathologize the foreign in his cultural diagnosis. Instead, his interest in the imagined immunities of this period presupposes what the dominant rhetoric of contagion sought to negate: that what was foreign was never really foreign at all. At its core, this reflects what Stanhope Smith and Wollstonecraft argued in their own texts: humans are originally the same, and difference is ultimately a matter of environment and circumstance. This is what endows immunological citizenship with its political promise.

In *Ormond* and *Arthur Mervyn*, Brown imagines a biopolitical horizon in which perceived immunities redefine what it means to be foreign or obtain membership in a free society. Although Brown's commitment to epistemological uncertainties makes it difficult to pin down his politics, his betrayal of repressed anxieties toward republican projects in the United States, France, and the West Indies hints at the complexity of his historical consciousness. It is telling that his friend, Smith, wrote—but never published—a utopian fiction that reimagined the structure and environment of the republic rather than its inhabitants. The freedom he envisioned could exist as long as the air and the established hierarchies were kept free from disease. Brown, however, was less interested in how communities could shape disease; instead, his novels explore the ways in which resistance to disease could reshape communities. Aware that claims of French and black immunities were inaccurate, Brown still imbues these imagined immunities with cultural capital; immigrant communities in his novels tend to promote and hasten a democratic consensus. As Constantia is removed from a pestilential American political environment, Brown envisions an immunological

citizenship resistant to utopian revision, and a community “seasoned” by inevitable contact with the bodies and politics of a larger Atlantic world.

HUMAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND THE PROMISE OF INDISTINCTION

Even as two of Brown’s Gothic novels explore the leveling power of disease and its ability to think about the political promise of racial indistinction, a third novel, *Edgar Huntly*, builds on questions about race to challenge species taxonomies as well. In this section I argue that *Edgar Huntly* is a werewolf narrative. Considering the rise of posthumanism and animal studies—fields suited to the study of such narratives—it is surprising that few scholars have read Charles Brockden Brown’s Gothic novel within this tradition, even as animals and animal transformations serve major functions in the text. As early as 1994, Jared Gardner noted that “few bodies of criticism surrounding a work by a major American author are so insistently uniform in their concerns and conclusions”⁶⁴ as those surrounding *Edgar Huntly*, and over the last twenty years scholars have continued to focus on the novel for its “power to express the cultural nationalism of post-revolutionary America.”⁶⁵ Yet even as *Edgar Huntly* continues to be read as a political novel, these readings often miss the important role biology plays in shaping and articulating the messy politics of a so-called “age of democratic revolutions.” Scholars have often noted that werewolf narratives have a long history serving particular political and cultural ends.⁶⁶ In this essay, I demonstrate a clear link between the political and the biological by arguing that *Edgar Huntly* can be productively read through the lens of lycanthropy—that is, as a story of a man turning into a wolf—and thus as a narrative of “indistinction” between man and animal that also comments on the instability of democracy in this period. As the limits of political subjectivity are questioned in an age of democratic

revolutions, so too is the limit between human and animal rendered less than certain. By situating *Edgar Huntly* squarely within a tradition of werewolf fiction, I demonstrate how Brown's well-known narrative of sleepwalking and frontier violence has deep and surprising connections with both eighteenth-century accounts of lycanthropy and current critical preoccupations with "becoming animal."⁶⁷

The critical stakes of demonstrating lycanthropy in *Edgar Huntly* are twofold. First, species indistinction challenges Enlightenment beliefs in human exceptionalism by presenting human-animal transformations as a natural consequence of radical democratic equality. The instability of democracy also reflects an instability of the species that manifests itself as lycanthropy in the novel. These human-animal transformations fuel the Gothic horror of *Edgar Huntly* and establish human plasticity as a dangerously unbounded marker of American identity. My reading of the novel establishes human-animal indistinction as an arena where debates over democracy and radical equality can take place. Written in the wake of the American Revolution and against the backdrop of the French and Haitian revolutions, *Edgar Huntly* is a narrative in which shapeshifting stands in for political and scientific inquiries about the boundedness of the human amidst debates about political equality.⁶⁸ Second, this section comments on the relationship between human politics and literary form—namely, the American Gothic. What makes the American Gothic exceptional is its move towards indistinction, a move that is predicated on the radicalism of American politics. Unlike a European Gothic, where class lines are crossed, Brown crafts an American Gothic in which we see species lines crossed. Brown imagines the move from a European Gothic to an American Gothic not merely as a geographical shift from European castles to the American wilderness, but as an ontological shift: the American Gothic enables both political and biological indistinction.

Throughout the eighteenth century, Enlightenment beliefs in human exceptionalism were manifest in an absolute and stark contrast between the natural world and the human, a contrast Brown explicitly challenges in *Edgar Huntly*. Instead, he uses lycanthropic transformations—specifically the transition from human to nonhuman animal and back—to disrupt established categories of belonging in a multispecies American wilderness. Brown thematizes this reconsideration most emphatically by recoding sleepwalking as a process of lycanthropic transformation and uses these transformations to interrogate the relationship between American exceptionalism and the status of the human, simultaneously disavowing the exceptional nature of human beings while clinging to an exceptional model of what it means to be American. The possibility of unlimited human indistinction, or the complete erosion of species boundaries, produces a Gothic sublimity in Brown’s fiction as species transformations threaten to erase categorical difference. Yet that possibility also fuels his desire to craft an exceptionalist American literature. The “new performance” of an American Gothic extolled in his preface ultimately becomes a performance of species indistinction.⁶⁹ When contrasted with Clithero’s story about leaving Europe, the lycanthropic transformations Edgar and Clithero undergo in the American wilderness mark a shift from the conventions of European Gothic to the distinctly American Gothic Brown has been credited with founding. The embedding of Clithero’s narrative within Edgar’s own story demonstrates how a new Gothic emphasis on species indistinction, here exemplified through lycanthropy, is part of a larger transatlantic conversation.⁷⁰

Brown sets apart his American Gothic from European predecessors by representing lycanthropy in the novel through a distinctly American beast: his humans do not become *wolves*, they become *panthers*. Unlike wolves, panthers are

reclusive and solitary creatures, although like wolves they are primarily nocturnal. As Brown breaks down distinctions between human and animal, however, he also does not care to distinguish too carefully between kinds of animals that humans might become; that is, using a variety of animals extends his logic of indistinction. Still, his choice to use the panther does align with Brown's goal stated in his preface: to develop a distinctly American Gothic. In this case, he Americanizes the Gothic werewolf narratives he was familiar with out of Ireland and Europe by substituting panthers for wolves, while otherwise remaining faithful to other conventions of lycanthropic literature. As werewolves were primarily solitary, even though wolves themselves are pack animals, Brown locates in the American wilderness a more distinctly American model for lycanthropy: the solitary panther. The solitary nature of the panther becomes important by the end of the novel as Edgar finds himself unable to form a pack with Clithero—a point I return to at the end of this essay.

The nonhuman subjects in *Edgar Huntly* help us reconsider debates about contemporary biopolitics, particularly the work of Donna Haraway and Giorgio Agamben. Throughout the novel, Brown interrogates what Haraway has called “the Great Divides of animal/human, nature/culture, organic/technical, and wild/domestic” by making the ontological claim that one is always-already “becoming with” other species—not simply existing alongside them.⁷¹ As writings by Carolus Linnaeus and the Comte de Buffon became emblematic of a growing interest in classifying the world taxonomically, American thinkers such as Benjamin Rush similarly looked to distinguish humans from beasts.⁷² Yet human-animal boundaries remained porous in the 1790s and into the nineteenth century as taxonomers attempted to reconcile folkloric traditions of species transformation with emergent discourses of associationist and evolutionary philosophy.⁷³ The influence of Gothic and

folk traditions on Brown's writings has been well-documented, but he was also familiar with recent scientific writings on somnambulism by Erasmus Darwin and seventeenth-century writings on the "melancholic metamorphosis" of lycanthropy by figures such as Thomas Willis and Robert Burton.⁷⁴ The possibility that humans could transform into animals was an argument even sophisticated minds in this period took seriously, although Enlightenment philosophers often sought to explain away such aberrations. The flip side of an Enlightenment belief in human exceptionalism was the fear that fixed human-animal distinctions were the real fantasy.⁷⁵

In bringing together the biological and the political, Brown was drawing on a conjectural history popularized earlier by Thomas Hobbes, who envisioned a state of nature in which "men are like those beasts which are naturally wild, but capable of being tamed." In *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes argues that "dejection subjects a man to causeless fears; which is a madness commonly called MELANCHOLY, apparent also in divers manners; as in the haunting of solitudes, and graves; in superstitious behavior; and in fearing some one, some another particular thing."⁷⁶ Hobbes's reference to haunting graves seems representative of a rare form melancholy called *lycanthropia* or "wolf-madness." Burton describes such madness in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, where he characterizes those afflicted as men "howling about graves and fields in the night" who cannot be persuaded they are not becoming an animal.⁷⁷ Solitude, causeless fears, roaming the cemeteries, and turning into an animal—or simply acting like one—were all symptoms of melancholia, a condition of which Brown was certainly aware.⁷⁸ Brown was also familiar with Irish folk literature on werewolves, as Barnard and Shapiro have demonstrated, and in *Edgar and Clithero* he captures this melancholic prowling by allowing both figures to haunt a grave-like elm at night.⁷⁹ Melancholy

links sleepwalking and lycanthropy together as liminal states that enable Brown to explore species boundlessness.

Agamben has similarly drawn on the question of lycanthropy in the twentieth century to examine the political boundaries of the human. In *Homo Sacer*, he argues that human-animal transformations create a state of exception, or “a continuous transition between man and beast, nature and culture.”⁸⁰ In his discussion of the ban and the wolf, Agamben specifically invokes lycanthropy as he argues, “what had to remain in the collective unconscious as a monstrous hybrid of human and animal, divided between the forest and the city—the werewolf—is, therefore, in its origin the figure of the man who has been banned from the city.”⁸¹ Although Edgar is not explicitly banned, George Toles has noted that *Edgar Huntly* is Brown’s only novel to avoid the city altogether.⁸² Instead, he argues that the novel’s wilderness landscape serves as a backdrop to Edgar’s violent encounters with Indians and a distorted reflection of the city. Edgar—no longer surrounded by the familiar—feels alienated by a primitive world and its savage inhabitants. As a werewolf figure, or what Agamben describes as one “who is precisely *neither man nor beast*, and who dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither,” Edgar’s liminal status permanently alienates him from the familiar.⁸³ While this defamiliarization exposes the sublimity of Edgar’s lycanthropic transformations, it also establishes the Gothic as something that does more than threateningly erode boundaries, instead enabling boundary-crossings that are both exhilarating and politically liberating.

CLITHERO’S MAGICAL TRANSITIONS

Edgar Huntly opens with Edgar searching for the murderer of his friend, Waldegrave, only to discover Clithero: a self-exiled Irish criminal who fled Europe and

took up residence in America. Edgar initially finds Clithero emerging from the elm where Waldegrave had been killed and describes him as having a “melancholy wildness.”⁸⁴ Both Clithero and Edgar are melancholic figures, not only for their brooding natures but also for their shared nervous disorder: sleepwalking, or somnambulism. Somnambulism provides Brown with a means for exploring what Agamben calls the “threshold of indistinction” between humanity and animality by imagining Edgar and Clithero as liminal beings who exist in a state between wakefulness and sleep.⁸⁵ This disruption of consciousness makes them animalistic: both men exist at a lower level of consciousness—one of animation without human thought—and in a liminal state of mind that fits medical perceptions of lycanthropy. Their liminality challenges the prevalent human-animal dichotomies of Enlightenment science and the perceived stability of humans atop the great chain of being by undermining such exceptionalist taxonomies.⁸⁶ If we look beyond readings of sleepwalking as a manifestation of postcolonial trauma, we can better recognize how Brown draws on the already-present interrelationship between lycanthropy and sleep to explore the liberating potential of interspecies transformation.⁸⁷

Within the conventions of werewolf literature, those afflicted are often unable to recall their nocturnal travels that take them from the city to the wilderness; they wake in the morning, as if from a dream, with limited physical evidence of their recent animalistic actions.⁸⁸ Although early descriptions of human-animal transformation are rooted in the supernatural, the somnambulist narratives of Edgar and Clithero also share a number of similarities with eighteenth-century medical case histories. Brown was aware, for example, of Erasmus Darwin’s description of sleepwalking as a “melancholy madness” in which the somnambulist proceeds as if asleep yet suffers an “inattention to the stimulus of external objects,” thus retaining knowledge reflected in

his nocturnal wanderings and troubled mind.⁸⁹ For Brown, sleepwalking produces in Edgar and Clithero a liminal state that closely mirrors the clinical state of lycanthropy. He recognizes lycanthropy as a psychopathological state—a “species of delirium” at one point—but also recognizes that such distinctions are bound to collapse. Brown does not conflate sleepwalking with human-animal transformation, yet he allows somnambulism to facilitate such transformations in Edgar and Clithero. Their transformations extend beyond the normal bounds of nervous disorders and offer a more robust challenge to determinist taxonomies of the period.

Brown similarly interrogates the possibilities of transformation and mixture across species by tying humans and nonhumans into relational knots. Particularly through the doubling of Edgar and Clithero—yet also in their relationships with Indians, panthers, and plants—Brown exposes the potential for what Haraway calls “joint, cross-species invention” in *Edgar Huntly*.⁹⁰ Although twinning is common within a number of archetypal frameworks (including the doppelgänger motif in romantic fiction), doubling also has a special relevance for lycanthropic literature.⁹¹ In his study of wolves in American literature, S.K. Robisch writes that “shape-shifting, twin gods, hybridization, and wolf brothers all run through wolf stories in a leitmotif of doubling”⁹² and Haraway similarly frames metamorphosis as a “reworking [of] form to make a kind of one out of two.”⁹³ Robisch also notes that the term “*lycanthrope* has a twin meaning, a double persona” in its dual categorization as psychological condition and physical/biological transformation.⁹⁴ While scholarship that examines doubling has a long history in Brown studies, doubling in lycanthropy offers a unique angle into the politics of human plasticity. By making the boundary between the human and the animal malleable through shapeshifting, Brown questions not only the rigidity of

Enlightenment taxonomies, but also the rigidity of social and political distinctions in an American wilderness that allows for such transformations.

Edgar's first encounter with Clithero takes place as he revisits the "fatal Elm" in an attempt to find clues regarding Waldegrave's murder. There he discerns a presence that slowly emerges from—and distinguishes itself against—the tree; he insists that "this apparition was human" and not a figment of the imagination. Edgar initially describes "the shape of a man" with "something like flannel . . . wrapt round his waist. The rest of his frame was naked." He continues his description of Clithero as "a figure, robust and strange, and half-naked." Edgar keeps his distance for some time, watching as the man digs at the ground with his hands and non-linguistically communicates his grief with uncontrollable sobbing. The encounter ends with Clithero wandering into the wilderness without paying attention to Edgar's calls, at which point Edgar identifies him as "a sleeper."⁹⁵ Yet the same markers that Edgar uses to identify Clithero as a sleepwalker are those that might also easily describe him as a human-animal hybrid: a half-naked figure, shaped like a man, digging at the ground.

Edgar assumes the man must "have a name and a terrestrial habitation," an assumption that forms part of Brown's continued resistance to the supernatural assumptions conventional to Gothic fiction. Without much effort, he later assumes that the man must be Clithero Edny, "a person of a very different cast" and "and emigrant from Ireland."⁹⁶ Edgar concludes to return to the elm the following night to see if this figure will appear once more. Clithero indeed returns to dwell upon the tree, and as he departs Edgar determines to follow him. After a lengthy chase through thickets and woods, Edgar arrives at "the verge of a considerable precipice" that leads to a concealed cavern. Immediately upon noticing the cavern, Edgar claims that "[Clithero] plunged into the darkness, and in a few moments, his steps were heard no

more!” Deciding against entering this cave for himself, Edgar waits the entire night at the entrance for Clithero to once again emerge, and at length is “excited by a sound that seemed to issue from the cave.” With his eyes fixed upon the entrance, “the rustling increased and presently an animal leapt forth, of what kind I was unable to discover.”⁹⁷ The possibility of human-animal transformation is symbolized as Clithero descends into the cavern from which a panther then emerges, a visual exchange of a human for an animal that also takes place elsewhere in the text.

Edgar takes up this search again later, when, having ventured into the wilderness in search of Clithero, he passes through a cave and into some deep, unexplored tract of wilderness. “It was probable that human feet had never before gained this recess, that human eyes had never fixed upon these gushing waters,” he notes, for “the aboriginal inhabitants had no motives to lead them into caves like this, and ponder on the verge of such a precipice. Their successors were still less likely to have wandered hither. Since the birth of this continent, I was probably the first who had deviated thus remotely from the customary paths of men.” Edgar takes great pains to establish his singularity in having penetrated the wilderness to the point where no others had before, communing with the water, and plants, and rocks, and pine branches on a path that separates him from others of his species. Indeed, he continues speculating, “to meet a human creature . . . would have been wholly adverse to my expectation.”⁹⁸ His expectation, in inhabiting a presumably nonhuman space, is that any creature he should meet would also be nonhuman.

Such is the preface to the second compelling moment of lycanthropy in *Edgar Huntly*, as Edgar sees Clithero emerge on the other side of a chasm where a “magical transition” once again gives Clithero a human countenance:

While musing upon these ideas, my eye was fixed upon the foaming current. At length I looked upon the rocks which confined and embarrassed its course. I admired their fantastic shapes and endless irregularities. Passing from one to the other of these, my attention lighted, at length, as if by some magical transition, on—a human countenance!⁹⁹

Brown uses the word “transition” often, not only in *Edgar Huntly*, but in his other novels as well. In *Wieland*—a novel tellingly subtitled “the Transformation”—Clara similarly describes the “magical transitions” of Carwin near the novel’s end, questioning “whether he were infernal or miraculous, or human.”¹⁰⁰ Transitions from one condition to another are described in *Wieland* as “ambiguities, abruptnesses, and dark transitions” and as “a transition of [Wieland’s] former madness into a new shape.”¹⁰¹ Clithero’s “magical transitions” mark a similar shift from the “melancholy madness” of his lycanthropic wanderings to something new.

Edgar describes Clithero by noting, “his scanty and coarse garb, had been nearly rent away by brambles and thorns, his arms, bosom and cheek were overgrown and half-concealed by hair. There was something in his attitude and looks denoting more than anarchy of thoughts and passions. His rueful, ghastly, and immoveable eyes, testified not only that his mind was ravaged by despair, but that he was pinched with famine.”¹⁰² The change in Clithero is sudden, the transformation dramatic, and his behavior trance-like. This description echoes seventeenth-century scientific descriptions of lycanthropy, and—as Barnard and Shapiro argue—this passage also echoes an Irish folk tradition similarly acknowledged by the Royal Irish Academy’s John Dunne. Edgar is startled by this appearance, and for a time merely gazes upon Clithero’s figure. Powerless to offer relief, Edgar decides that “all that I could do was to speak,” and with a shrill and piercing voice, he calls out: “the chasm and the rocks

loudened and reverberated my accents while I exclaimed . . . *Man! Clithero!*” Edgar does not simply call out to Clithero by name, prefacing it instead with the species identifier of “Man!” He notes immediately after that his call was “effectual” in that it temporarily “shook off his trance.”¹⁰³ Shaking off the trance is thus an act of species recognition; Clithero is restored as a human subject in the wilderness after doubt is cast due to his transformation. He has been reabsorbed and reclassified by Edgar despite his threateningly indistinct taxonomic features.¹⁰⁴

Clithero runs and does not return to Solebury. Concerned, Edgar returns to the wilderness to leave food for Clithero, at which time he cuts down a tree in order to bridge the chasm that separates them. Edgar attempts to engage the animalistic Clithero in a relationship akin to Haraway’s companion species; by crossing the symbolic gap between the human and the animal (or the animalistic Clithero), his act of feeding makes them literally “messmates.”¹⁰⁵ Edgar’s third trip puts him face-to-face with the panther that has taken Clithero’s place—our second visual exchange of Clithero for a panther—and he only survives the encounter through the destruction of the wooden bridge. As the animal tries to cross the chasm, it falls to his death, a commentary on the dangers of attempting to return to the human after becoming animal. Edgar and Clithero should not survive the wilderness, yet their animal transformations allow them to navigate, inhabit, and survive this multispecies world. Haraway’s insistence on the word “entangle” seems apt in this context. Edgar and Clithero are not only narratively entangled, but often entangled in the plant and animal interactions of the American wilderness, demonstrating how the nonhuman world corrects our assumptions and fantasies by creating zones of indistinction. Brown imagines an American space where humans both recognize and resist

themselves as always-already nonhuman, an American space where entanglement and transformation produce companion species.

HOWLING, INDIGESTION, AND EDGAR'S "SAVAGE AWAKENING"

No single passage in *Edgar Huntly* has received the sustained critical attention as that which Gardner refers to as Edgar's "savage awakening."¹⁰⁶ Depicted either as a primal scene of rebirth that breaks down the distinction between the savage and the civilized, or as evidence of "Indian-hating" that works against idealized representations of the "noble savage," this moment has been read primarily in terms of white guilt, dark doublings, and frontier psychopathology. Yet as Brown remystifies a world in which science struggles to produce certainties, he opens up the possibility that paranormal phenomena are neither psychologically nor supernaturally constructed. Instead these phenomena are more akin to the "implosions of the discursive realms of nature and culture" that Haraway refers to as "naturecultures."¹⁰⁷ Edgar's narrative produces an ontological framework that opens up more fluid human-animal possibilities that aren't strictly incorporated within a dominant cultural mode or a monstrous otherness.

Unable to locate himself as he awakens, Edgar discovers that he is lost and out of place. This dislocation leads him to participate in various acts of sensory emplacement—challenges, perhaps, to Locke's dark closet—in order to affirm his physical existence. Although Edgar is no passive recipient of impressions in a Lockean sense, his identity as a living being is embedded in the bodies and environments around him. We learn that Edgar fell asleep in his bed and awoke underground in a cave far removed from civilization. He is "conscious, for a time, of nothing but existence" although the nature of this existence is questioned as if he only "existed in

a wakeful dream.”¹⁰⁸ As Edgar opens his eyes and finds himself surrounded by darkness, his extended hands are met by empty space. Darkness makes it impossible to compare distances and directions, and although at length his hands discover a stone wall, his explorations convince him that he is completely entombed.

Edgar’s last accessible memory is going to sleep, and as he recalls Clithero’s somnambulism he similarly diagnoses himself a sleepwalker. His previous definition of sleepwalking as a state “[where] the notices of sense are partly excluded, and they are shut out from a knowledge of their intire condition” returns full force as he recognizes his own insensibility and confusion.¹⁰⁹ The ability of his voice to operate without impediment when asleep echoes Clithero’s concerns: “I was not aware, for some time, of my perturbed sleep. Yet I was anew distressed at the discovery that my thoughts found their way to my lips, without my being conscious of it.”¹¹⁰ The liminality of his voice, defined by its ability to occupy both wakefulness and sleep, forces Edgar to recognize that his narrative is little more than a poor echo of his experience. As sleepwalkers, Edgar and Clithero speak only through a deferred voice, clinging to their own echoes and appropriating their voices only as they wake. As a lycanthropic figure, Edgar is forced to contend with an autonomous voice that exists on the edge of (human) consciousness and whose echoes define the boundaries of his subjectivity.

As he regains consciousness, Edgar also regains dominion over his voice. “I now exerted my voice,” he tells us, “and cried as loud as my wasted strength would admit. Its echoes were sent back to me in broken and confused sounds and from above. This effort was casual, but some part of that uncertainty in which I was involved, was instantly dispelled by it.”¹¹¹ Unable to see, Edgar can only locate himself by crying out and then listening the distorted echo of his own voice. The return of his voice emplaces him; as its echo surrounds him on all sides the aimlessness allows the sound to

expand and even produce new spaces, opening up the walls that surround him and mapping out the topography of the cave. Edgar's voice appears to shape his environment even as the echoes of the surrounding landscape similarly alter the topography of his—presumably human—voicescape. Just as Edgar's act of calling out to Clithero became a taxonomic act of shaping and identifying him as a man, Edgar's voice here crafts the American wilderness into an exceptional space where human plasticity—and thus human-animal indistinction—is made possible.

In an attempt to navigate this transformed setting, Edgar is forced to trust his ears. Acquainting himself “as far as was possible with the dimensions of the place, [Edgar] hallooed with all [his] force, knowing that sound is reflected according to the distance and relative position of the substances from which it is repelled.”¹¹² The continued echoes of his voice place Edgar in a material realm, giving substance to the world around him. Listening to his own echo creates a moment of self-recognition, one made explicit in his claim that “the effect produced by my voice on this occasion resembled, with remarkable exactness, the effect which was then produced.”¹¹³ His voice resonates within the cave, evoking a recognizable—albeit altered—voice from the past. Yet this recognition extends beyond a comparison with a self that existed at another time; as such, these echoes should be considered more than products of a distorted human scream. Edgar's voice has been transformed.

These vocal transformations—along with the physical transformations described later in the passage—are lycanthropic, and through them Brown explores a potential for interspecies mixture that moves beyond human-human encounters. Edgar's “halloos” are cries out into an unknown wilderness, and the “broken and confused” echoes return to him as the nonhuman responses of a diverse, multispecies world. It is worth noting that “halloo” and “howl” have similar etymological roots in the

Middle English *houlen* and the Germanic *heulen*, which both refer to an “echoic origin.” The earliest uses of “halloo” also referred to the calling of hunting dogs, which is also particularly resonant in Edgar’s narrative, in which the surname “Huntly” evokes the image and persona of a “hunter.” Howling in *Edgar Huntly* serves both as a moment of vocal recognition and an outward manifestation of lycanthropic transformation. Similar signs of a violent transformation are apparent in the alterations to Edgar’s body, which is half-naked, covered in blood and bruises, and barely conscious. His awakening in this state represents his ongoing process of becoming animal.

Edgar continues to explore his dark surroundings with his voice, noting, “I once more tasked my understanding and my sense, to discover the nature of my present situation and the means of escape. I listened to catch some sound.”¹¹⁴ The sounds he hears in the cave do not appear to grow nearer, but Edgar remains satisfied as long as they can be heard. His howling gives way to bodily cries as he tells us:

My hunger speedily became ferocious. I tore the linen of my shirt
between my teeth and swallowed the fragments. I felt a strong propensity
to bite the flesh from my arm. My heart overflowed with cruelty, and I
pondered on the delight I should experience in rending some living
animal to pieces, and drinking its blood and grinding its quivering fibres
between my teeth.¹¹⁵

Often read as a violent, cannibalistic depiction of Edgar as Indian, this passage invokes neither scalping nor other violent practices detailed in the captivity narratives with which Brown was familiar. Instead, Brown evokes a more transformative experience in which Edgar becomes a predatory nonhuman animal. His desire for blood also looks forward to vampiric conventions of Gothic literature, and his yearning for raw flesh mirrors classical medical writings on lycanthropy and mental disease.

These desires also preface a new encounter with a panther that complicates the other doublings throughout the novel. As Edgar looks about the dark cave, he finds himself face-to-face with a panther that mirrors his gaze. The eyes of the panther are the first objects he sees, and he notes, “they resembled a fixed and obscure flame. They were motionless. Though lustrous themselves they created no illumination around them. . . . These were the eyes of a panther.”¹¹⁶ If Edgar’s experience with the “echoic origin” of his own voice is one of self-recognition, his visual encounter with the panther is a visual recognition of himself as animal—in this moment he is the hunted. Convinced he is in mortal danger, and without deliberation, Edgar represses this moment of self-recognition and strikes a fatal blow to the dark reflection of his own beastly image. He writes that his tomahawk “penetrated the scull and the animal fell, struggling and shrieking to the ground.”¹¹⁷ We should note that Edgar barely escaped death when similarly confronted by a starved panther earlier in the novel, an experience that calls into question the roles of predator and prey and blurs the boundaries between species. Edgar describes the resemblance between this panther’s cry and that of a human, although within the cave “the effect of [the panther’s] voice, in these subterranean abodes, was unspeakably rueful.”¹¹⁸ These cries produce an uncanny echo of Edgar’s voice, one that no longer dissipates uncertainty but instead produces fear. Despondent and aware of his own transformation, Edgar sinks to the ground, hearing his own voice echoed in the death throes of a beast.

As we’ve seen, Edgar’s transformation begins with, but does not directly result from, his sleepwalking. Somnambulism dislocates Edgar, providing evidence of both his nervous disorder and his anxieties toward being less than human. Shapeshifting takes place only after Edgar confirms his existence in the cave and suffers the basic needs common across species: hunger and thirst. Upon killing the panther, he is

again assaulted by hunger. Increasingly aware of his own animality, Edgar attempts to resist and repress his animalistic tendencies. His search for a distinction between his humanity and his animality demonstrates yet another convention typical in werewolf fiction. As his ears inform him the panther has died, Edgar explains:

The first suggestion that occurred was to feed upon the carcass of this animal. My hunger had arrived at that pitch where all fastidiousness and scruples are at an end. I crept to the spot. . . . I will not shock you by relating the extremes to which dire necessity had driven me. I review this scene with loathing and horror. Now that it is past I look back upon it as on some hideous dream. The whole appears to be some freak of insanity. No alternative was offered, and hunger was capable to be appeased, even by a banquet so detestable.¹¹⁹

Unable to render his “banquet” cultural through cooking, Edgar is shocked by his own willingness to eat raw flesh. Yet even as he professes reluctance to the idea of consuming the animal raw, Edgar realizes that his continued existence relies upon appeasing his hunger and literally “becoming with” (consuming) the dead panther.

Edgar continues with a less disinterested justification of his meal, claiming, “If this appetite has sometimes subdued the sentiments of nature, and compelled the mother to feed upon the flesh of her offspring, it will not excite amazement that I did not turn from the yet warm blood and reeking fibres of a brute.”¹²⁰ He returns to the rhetoric of animalistic desire wherein he “pondered the delight” of “drinking blood” and grinding “quivering fibres” in his teeth. Edgar conflates the human and the animal as he argues that the American wilderness is a space where a mother may eat her child without exciting amazement. America thus becomes exceptional in that it is a space where the human, as a category, is not; it is a space where species distinctions fall

away. Edgar's delight is short-lived, however, for as "one evil was now removed, only to give place to another" and his narrative quickly becomes one of indigestion:

The first sensations of fullness had scarcely been felt when my stomach was seized by pangs whose acuteness exceeded all that I ever before experienced. I bitterly lamented my inordinate avidity. The excruciations of famine were better than the agonies which this abhorred meal had produced. . . . I stretched myself on the ground. I threw myself into every posture that promised some alleviation of this evil. I rolled along the pavement of the cavern, wholly inattentive to the dangers that environed me.¹²¹

Rather than distancing him from this bestial consumption of raw flesh, Edgar emphasizes his own status as a shape-shifting through the physical consequences of his indigestion: contortions, rolling on the ground, and sensory inattention. In what later become the conventions of werewolf literature, lycanthropes are often depicted as rolling on the ground in a last-ditch attempt to halt the process of transformation. Edgar's indigestion here marks his own repressed animality.

Haraway writes that "eating one another and developing indigestion are [a] kind of transformative merger practice," and Edgar's experience similarly demonstrates this "co-opting of strangers" and "infolding of others."¹²² By eating the panther Brown moves beyond simply being present; rather, he becomes copresent through eating and "becoming with" his messmate. He also backs away from his earlier desire for famine, noting that "[what] I had eaten had produced temporary distress, but on the whole had been of use" and thus sees indigestion as "a useful effort of nature to subdue and convert to nourishment the matter I had swallowed."¹²³ Eating the panther is a liberatory experience; it not only permits Edgar to escape the cave, but also allows him to become worldly, to survive in the wilderness, to transform. As the "matter" of the

panther becomes part of Edgar, it, too, participates in a symbiotic process of infolding and becoming. We might also think about the political valence of indigestion, by recognizing lycanthropic transformations as an attempt to contain expansion. Werewolf literature often depicts the pain of the physical transformation as an attempt to keep the beast in, yet Brown's novel also seems to be playing with broader questions about expansion on the American frontier. We shouldn't forget that Waldegrave's murder at the hands of Deb and her tribe—the event that motivates the entire narrative—is ultimately tied up in the politics of westward expansion and Indian removal. Yet instead of speaking to a paradigm of cultural nationalism in which the consuming of territories and inhabitants becomes a mere mark of colonialism, Edgar's indigestion represents a different form of “becoming with” in which the young nation is itself transformed alongside its “messmates” in the wilderness.¹²⁴

Still, Edgar ultimately resists this metamorphosis even as he offers a seemingly Hobbesian justification for his “savage” actions. Following his (re)birth in the wilderness, the narrative becomes a journey back to civilization: not the journey of a man out of the state of nature, but the journey of a new species generated *in* nature.¹²⁵ Edgar's return to civilization is haunted by primitive echoes similar to those from the cave; he is particularly frightened to hear echoes of his own voice in the savage cries of the Indians he encounters, echoes which question his own relationship not only to beasts but also to primitive man. He is preoccupied with stifling the echoes of his own savage voice, at one point shooting an Indian before he could cry out, and in another returning to silence the “doleful shrieks” of an Indian he had merely wounded. Edgar's own voice is both too savage and not savage enough. More frightening, perhaps, is the possibility that every voice he hears is an indistinct and savage voice.

Edgar's encounter with the panther leaves him not only less civilized, but also less than human. His act of eating the panther is the culmination of this beastly transformation; it is only then he truly becomes with animal. We might compare his eating of raw flesh with an earlier folkloric tradition claimed by the Parnassians, who performed "a ritual where a boy was sacrificed and his guts made into a soup which was eaten by shepherds, one of whom would then turn into a tormented werewolf who was condemned to wander the countryside for eight years, regaining humanity by refraining from eating human flesh."¹²⁶ Brown's transformation into—and identification *with*—the panther is similarly cannibalistic, and his consumption of raw flesh hints at a larger failure to regain his humanity even as he journeys back to "civilization." His slaughter of the Indians—symbolically partaking of human flesh—becomes just one more experience with nonhuman subjectivity from which he can never recover.¹²⁷

EDGAR'S "UNNATURAL PARTICIPATION"

Following his violent return to civilization, Edgar's narrative begins to unravel quickly. To justify his violence at the end of the text, Edgar claims that "most men are haunted by some species of terror or antipathy, which they are, for the most part, able to trace to some incident which befell them in their early years," and he remarks that after seeing his parents killed by savage Indians as a youth he "never looked upon, or called up the image of a savage without shuddering."¹²⁸ Yet the most prominent examples of Edgar shuddering in the novel occur when he comes in contact with Clithero. Near the end of the text, for example, Edgar describes himself listening to Clithero and notes that "these asseverations were listened to with shuddering." Our final glimpse of Clithero takes place in the remains of Old Deb's hut, a borderland

space between civilization and wilderness where Edgar seeks out Clithero only to witness a final, unexpected transformation. Clithero's living conditions are slender, and Edgar notices that "there was nothing capable of human use" in the dwelling.¹²⁹ Clithero, who consistently served as Edgar's double, merely scowls at Edgar when he arrives and offers no sign that he remembers his fellow somnambulist.

Edgar proceeds to tell Clithero that his beloved Euphemia is still alive and her brother—Clithero's sworn enemy—is dead, a narrative he expects will bring hope to his fellow sleepwalker. Instead, Clithero responds with disbelief, proclaiming: "I will fly to the spot which thou describest. I will ascertain thy falsehood with my own eyes. If she be alive then am I reserved for the performance of a new crime." Edgar then tells us that Clithero has "darted through the door, and was gone in a moment, beyond my sight and my reach. . . . [he] fled with the swiftness of a deer."¹³⁰ It would be irresponsible, perhaps, to place too much emphasis on this reference, yet I do want to recognize Edgar's changing relationship to Clithero, who is no longer a beast of prey but now a swiftly departing deer. Realizing that he has just placed Euphemia and his own father-figure, Sarsefield, in mortal danger, Edgar immediately attempts to defend himself by arguing that his misguided actions were merely the result of a "powerful benevolence." In this context, his reference to Clithero as a non-predatory animal speaks as much to Edgar's own shifting condition as to that of Clithero.

Deleuze and Guattari have argued that becomings and becomings-animal require alliances, particularly alliances with no possible filiation (i.e. different species). In this particular passage, we see that Edgar for the first time understands his alliance with Clithero and recognizes their doubling. In becoming-animal, Edgar and Clithero form both a self and more than a self—they form a pack. From the moment he first followed Clithero into the woods, Edgar participated in becoming-animal with his

fellow somnambulist. By seeking out Clithero and pleading for recognition in this final scene, Edgar attempted once again to write himself into the pack and to hear his own animality in Clithero's voice. Yet in this moment Edgar cannot fully hear himself. Following Clithero's silence, Edgar begins to ramble incessantly, revisiting and revising his narrative in an act of frantic auto-affection. He experiences what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as an "unheard-of becoming," an unnerving encounter with human subjectivity not unlike that of his "savage awakening." What they describe as the "power of the pack that throws the self into upheaval and makes it reel" now forces Edgar to grasp at his own humanity in an attempt to secure a coherent human subjectivity.¹³¹ His lycanthropic transformations have left him fragmented, and as Edgar resists becoming-animal at the novel's close, he finds himself instead unnerved by his place in the pack: he represses his "unnatural participation" with Clithero and instead clings to the illusion of a more unified subjectivity.

Edgar is left with this illusion, and we are left without Edgar's voice. The final letter of the novel is written not by Edgar, but by his mentor and father-figure, Sarsefield. Edgar's directive resembles that described by Deleuze and Guattari in their analysis of Lord Chandos: "a strange imperative wells up in him: either stop writing, or write like a rat . . . writing is a becoming, writing is traversed by strange becomings that are not becomings-writer, but becomings-rat, becomings-insect, becomings-wolf, etc."¹³² Edgar's attempt to write a narrative of remaining human has failed, and he cannot bring himself to write (or even acknowledge) his narrative of becoming-animal, so he stops writing altogether. The novel instead ends with Sarsefield's response to Edgar: a description of Edgar's letter as the literal source of a miscarriage that deprives him of an heir. Edgar's interspecies crisis thus severs a familial relationship, and, instead of being generative, occasions a fatal reproductive disorder.¹³³

Brown's exploration of multispecies cohabitation collapses with the narrative itself, leading to an unexpected breakdown of the American wilderness as a posthuman utopia. Rather than representing the American wilderness as a potentially generative space of mixture, Edgar's transformation in the end produces a desire to resist hybridity and reify a strictly human subjectivity. Much like the Deleuzian hybrid, Edgar's lycanthropic experience thwarts his adopted family's reproductive act and his return to civilization with no prospects of marriage leaves him sterile. Yet I don't believe that Edgar's impotence and Clithero's presumed death should be read strictly as failures, nor do they undermine the seriousness of Brown's inquiry into the potential for interspecies transformation. The fluid ontologies of the American wilderness still allow Brown to demonstrate a redemptive narrative of human indistinction, even as *Edgar Huntly* falls short of the collaborative worlding envisioned by posthumanist scholars such as Haraway. The novel's depiction of violent multispecies cohabitation where human and nonhuman "messmates" don't get along instead reflects Brown's shifting views—and those of many others—toward the increasingly violent acts of leveling of the French revolution.

As such, reading lycanthropy as a commentary on human exceptionalism in *Edgar Huntly* demonstrates how questions about the stability of the human as a biological category also become questions about the stability of the human as a political category in this period. Brown recognizes that democracy requires the eradication of distinctions—often celebrating indistinction as a central feature of the American wilderness and an emergent American Gothic—even as his attempt to map out the transformative potential of indistinction collapses under its own equalizing tendencies. More importantly, Brown ends the novel by again violating the conventions of the Gothic (and eighteenth-century novels more broadly) by refusing to offer us a

tidy resolution. Unlike the social violations which get resolved in an earlier Gothic tradition, where the main characters are reabsorbed into accepted communities, the ontological boundary crossings in *Edgar Huntly* allow neither Edgar nor Clithero to fully return to society. This ongoing potential for species indistinction ultimately fuels the gothic horror of novel. Edgar's transformation cannot be reversed, even as he attempts to rewrite his narrative at the end. Instead, the novel's scientific imperative reasserts the need to question human exceptionalism in an American wilderness where the liberatory appeal of indistinction must be taken seriously.

NOTES

¹ Charles Brockden Brown, *Alcuin: A Dialogue*, ed. Lee R. Edwards (New York: Grossman, 1970), 13.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 14.

⁴ William Dunlap, *Life of Charles Brockden Brown: Together with Selections from the Rarest of His Printed Works*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: James P. Parke, 1815), 2:7-11.

⁵ It is worth noting that Stanhope Smith saw yellow fever as racial degeneracy (move toward the savage), which is interesting alongside Rush's attempts to use disease as a way of marking out racial distinctions, even as those distinctions break down due to the leveling power of epidemic in Philadelphia. In this way, Brown is engaging a similar discourse of disease and indistinction as both Smith and Wollstonecraft.

⁶ Russell B. Nye, "Historical Essay," in *Ormond; or, The Secret Witness*, ed. Sydney J. Krause, S. W. Reid, and Russell B. Nye (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1982), 307.

⁷ Roberto Esposito, *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 48.

⁸ Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 2.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Esposito, *Bíos*, 51.

¹¹ Wald, *Contagious*, 12-13.

¹² Wald references these "imagined immunities" as the title to Chapter 2. See also Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006).

¹³ Like we will see with Clithero's narrative later in this chapter, Brown opens *Ormond* with a fall from rank and distinction that closely mirrors the conventions of a European Gothic tradition.

¹⁴ Charles Brockden Brown, *Ormond; or, The Secret Witness*, ed. Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2009), 14-20.

¹⁵ Catherine O'Donnell Kaplan, *Men of Letters in the Early Republic: Cultivating Forums of Citizenship* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 1.

¹⁶ Letter written from John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 30 June 1813. *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*, ed. Lestor J. Cappon (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 346.

¹⁷ Elihu Hubbard Smith, *The Diary of Elihu Hubbard Smith (1771-1798)*, ed. James E. Cronin (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1973), 60.

¹⁸ Medical affiliations didn't always fall neatly along political lines. Smith, for example, was a Federalist and a climatist. He was also a student of Benjamin Rush, and his scathing reviews of contagionist theory led some to compare his *Medical Repository* with political gazettes from the period. Bryan Waterman notes, "The *Repository* mirrored partisan political gazettes that claimed to represent the 'popular voice' while dismissing opponents as dangerous." See Waterman, "Arthur Mervyn's Medical Repository and the Early Republic's Knowledge Industries," in *American Literary History* 15.2 (2003): 222.

¹⁹ C. F. Volney, *Tableau du climat et sol des Etats Unis* (A View of the Soil and Climate of the United States of America), trans. Charles Brockden Brown (New York: Hafner Publishing, 1968), 249n.

²⁰ Charles Brockden Brown, *Arthur Mervyn; or, Memoirs of the Year 1793*, ed. Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2008), 3.

²¹ See Charles Brockden Brown, "Walstein's School of History," in *Arthur Mervyn; or, Memoirs of the Year 1793*, ed. Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2008).

²² Brown, *Ormond*, 27.

²³ *Ibid.*, 157.

²⁴ For a discussion of advantages and disadvantages of reading Brown as a "diagnostician" see Bryan Waterman, "Introduction," in *Early American Literature* 44.2 (2009).

²⁵ Brown, *Ormond*, 40.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 50-55.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 161.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁹ Wald, 33.

³⁰ Philip Gould, "Race, Commerce, and the Literature of Yellow Fever in Early National Philadelphia," in *Early American Literature* 35 (2000), 157.

³¹ Brown, *Ormond*, 158.

³² Robert S. Levine, *Conspiracy and Romance: Studies in Brockden Brown, Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 52.

³³ Brown, *Ormond*, 37.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁶ See Charles Brockden Brown, "On the Consequences of Abolishing the Slave Trade to the West Indian Colonies," *The Literary Magazine, and American Register* 4.26, ed. Charles Brockden Brown (Philadelphia: John Conrad and Company, 1805): 375-381.

³⁷ Brown, *Ormond*, 40-41.

³⁸ Mathew Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia: With a Statement of the Proceedings that Took Place on the Subject, in Different Parts of the United States*, (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1793), 63.

³⁹ Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia in the Year 1793: And a Refutation of Some Censures, Thrown upon Them in Some Late Publications* (Philadelphia: Printed for the Authors, by William W. Woodward, 1794), 12.

⁴⁰ Carey's republican credentials are discussed in Phillip Lapsansky, "'Abigail, a Negress': The Role and Legacy of African Americans in the Yellow Fever Epidemic," in *A Melancholy Scene of Devastation: The Public Response to the 1793 Philadelphia Yellow Fever Epidemic*, eds. J. Worth Estes and Billy G. Smith (Canton, Massachusetts: Science History Publications, 1997), 69.

⁴¹ Sean X. Goudie, "On the Origin of American Specie(s): The West Indies, Classification, and the Emergence of Supremacist Consciousness in *Arthur Mervyn*," in *Revising Charles Brockden Brown: Culture, Politics, and Sexuality in the Early Republic*, eds. Philip Barnard, Mark L. Kamrath, and Stephen Shapiro (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004): 63.

- ⁴² J.H. Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead: The Great Plague of Yellow Fever in Philadelphia in 1793* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 99.
- ⁴³ Goudie, "American Specie(s)," 68.
- ⁴⁴ Brown, *Arthur Mervyn*, 113.
- ⁴⁵ Goudie, 60.
- ⁴⁶ Brown, *Arthur Mervyn*, 113-114.
- ⁴⁷ I will explore further these fears in Robert Montgomery Bird's *Sheppard Lee* in Chapter 4.
- ⁴⁸ Brown, *Arthur Mervyn*, 274.
- ⁴⁹ Michael Drexler, "Introduction," in *Secret History; or, The Horrors of St. Domingo and Laura*, ed. Michael Drexler (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2007), 22.
- ⁵⁰ Brown, *Ormond*, 158.
- ⁵¹ Levine, *Conspiracy and Romance*, 51.
- ⁵² Brown, *Ormond*, 158.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ⁵⁴ Levine, 34.
- ⁵⁵ Brown, *Ormond*, 126. The Bavarian Illuminati was an Enlightenment-era secret society founded in 1776. The term has been used to refer more generally to atheism and free-thinking, and to societies of intellectuals who taught deism and republicanism in seclusion. The Bavarian Illuminati was often discussed in the 1790s for their rumored association with the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 193-194.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 202.
- ⁵⁹ Levine, 16.
- ⁶⁰ Brown, *Ormond*, 20.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 216.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 201.
- ⁶³ Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 313.
- ⁶⁴ Jared Gardner, "Alien Nation: Edgar Huntly's Savage Awakening," in *American Literature* 66.3 (1994), 429.
- ⁶⁵ Justine Murison, "The Tyranny of Sleep: Somnambulism, Moral Citizenship, and Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly*," *Early American Literature* 44.2 (2009): 243.
- ⁶⁶ See studies published by Sabine Baring-Gould, *The Book of Werewolves* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 2009), Chantal Bourgault du Coudray, *The Curse of the Werewolf: Fantasy, Horror and the Beast Within* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), and Brian J. Frost, *The Essential Guide to Werewolf Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).

⁶⁷ Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro were the first to call for a lycanthropic reading of *Edgar Huntly* in their introduction to the novel: “Brown suggestively floats the possibility that Clithero is not merely a sleep-walker, whose nocturnal movements are forgotten in the light of day, but possibly a lycanthrope, a were-beast who shape-shifts across the borderlines between human and animal.” Barnard and Shapiro, “Introduction,” in *Edgar Huntly; or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker, with Related Texts* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2006), xxxix. Barnard and Shapiro rightly recognize the earlier work of Janie Hinds on human-animal boundaries in the text. This essay builds on the work of Hinds by turning my attention to the putatively main characters of the novel to examine how a reading of human-animal transformations in them changes our understanding of the context and politics of the novel. For more on the role of dogs in *Edgar Huntly*, see Hinds, “Deb’s Dogs: Animals, Indians, and Postcolonial Desire in Charles Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntly*,” *Early American Literature* 39.2 (2004).

⁶⁸ The Haitian Revolution seems particularly relevant here, given the questions raised there of racial equality and political subjectivity, and concurrent fears in the U.S. about loss of distinction not only between races, but—as this essay demonstrates—between species.

⁶⁹ Although well-known, it is perhaps worth citing this preface here. Brown writes that the success of his previous novel, *Arthur Mervyn* (1799) “has prompted the writer . . . to offer to the world a new performance. America has opened new views to the naturalist and politician, but has seldom furnished themes to the moral painter. That new springs of action and new motives to curiosity should operate,—that the field of investigation, opened to us by our own country, should differ essentially from those which exist in Europe,—may be readily conceived. . . . It is the purpose of this work to profit by some of these sources; to exhibit a series of adventures, growing out of the condition of our country, and connected with one of the most common and most wonderful diseases or affections of the human frame. . . . Puerile superstition and exploded manners, Gothic castles and chimeras, are the materials usually employed for this end. The incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the Western wilderness, are far more suitable; and for a native of America to overlook these would admit of no apology,” 3-4.

⁷⁰ The translation of British Gothic into American Gothic and Brown’s revision of European suspicions of American species are what open up indistinction as a politically liberatory concept, just as the confluence of political and biological narratives also make the Gothic a genre of utopian promise. In *Edgar Huntly*, Brown embeds a European Gothic narrative within his American tale, allowing us to think carefully about the Gothic as a transatlantic mode—one that travels with Clithero from England to America.

⁷¹ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 15.

⁷² Linnaeus and Buffon were arguably the most influential natural historians in this period. Their interest in clarifying the boundaries between species was shared by Philadelphia physician Benjamin Rush, who lectured that the transformation from one species to another was impossible. Both Linnaeus and Rush made exceptions that allowed for cases of hybridization, but these examples were limited. Brown was familiar with these figures through Elihu Hubbard Smith, who studied under Rush but was less committed to fixed distinctions. Smith also introduced Brown to Erasmus Darwin’s *Zoonomia*.

⁷³ Barnard and Shapiro highlight the ways Brown engages with the folkloric traditions, as does Luke Gibbons in “Ireland, America, and Gothic Memory: Transatlantic Terror in the Early Republic,” in *boundary 2* 31.1 (2004), 25-47. Within his immediate circle, figures such as Benjamin Rush and Elihu Hubbard Smith were both fascinated by hybridity and similar transformations, while trying to reconcile these aberrations with associationist philosophies emerging out of a Lockean tradition. Hinds also outlines key influences on Brown—including David Hartley, Boerhaave, and Darwin—while noting how many thinkers, Linnaeus among them, clung to folklore while developing their own theories.

⁷⁴ The influence of Burton on American writers has been noted most recently by Edward Cahill. See Cahill, *Liberty of the Imagination: Aesthetic Theory, Literary Form, and Politics in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012). It is also likely that he encountered Willis via Locke. Locke attended Willis’ lectures and similarly saw lycanthropy as a dangerous version of melancholy. Locke’s interest in mixture and species transformation can be seen in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and in his medical journals as he explores mixture with examples of rat-cats, mare-bulls, and changelings. Brown was familiar with Locke’s writings and shared many of his beliefs regarding sleep, sleepwalking, and consciousness. See Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Niddich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), and Locke, *The Selected Political Writings of John Locke*, ed. Paul E. Sigmund (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2005). For a more detailed

reading of the medical journals of John Locke, see also Wayne Glausser, *Locke and Blake: A Conversation Across the Eighteenth Century* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1998).

⁷⁵ This fear is perhaps most evident in early criticisms of Linnaean taxonomies that challenged human immutability by classifying men alongside other primates as *Anthropomorpha*.

⁷⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 49.

⁷⁷ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Holbrook Jackson (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), 141. Similar claims are found in the writings of Oribasius: “The persons affected go out at night time, wander among the tombs until morning, in every way imitating a wolf,” cited in N. Parker, “On Lycanthropy or Wolf-madness, a Variety of Insania Zoanthropica,” *Journal of Mental Science* 2.4 (1854): 52-53.

⁷⁸ This reading is informed, in part, by Diego Rossello’s “Hobbes and the Wolf-Man: Melancholy and Animality in Modern Sovereignty,” *New Literary History* 43.2 (2012).

⁷⁹ The elm is grave-like in that it is a recurring marker of Waldegrave’s death. That the name of Edgar’s friend, Waldegrave, is derived from the German for “forest-grave” seems apt as Edgar and Clithero prowled around the “fatal Elm” where he was murdered.

⁸⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 109.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁸² George Toles, “Charting the Hidden Landscape: *Edgar Huntly*,” in *Early American Literature* 16.2 (1981), 133-153.

⁸³ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 105.

⁸⁴ Brown, *Edgar Huntly*, 72.

⁸⁵ Agamben, 105.

⁸⁶ See Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

⁸⁷ This argument is present in much of the scholarship on *Edgar Huntly*. See, for example, the work of both Gardner and Hinds, who have been cited elsewhere in this chapter.

⁸⁸ It is worth noting that I refer to these conventions—which were far from established at this time—from a historical distance. Rather than merely drawing on existing conventions, Brown was participating in the creation of the conventions we now take for granted in werewolf fiction.

⁸⁹ See Erasmus Darwin, *Zoonomia; or, The Laws of Organic Life* (1794). This passage is included in the “Related Texts” of Barnard and Shapiro’s edition of *Edgar Huntly*, 202-203.

⁹⁰ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 205.

⁹¹ This provides us with another opportunity to locate *Edgar Huntly* within a larger tradition of werewolf fiction. Perhaps the best-known early reference to werewolves is found in the story of Lycaon in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, although lycanthropic conventions are also traced to the narrative of Niceros in *The Satyricon*. Although interest in animal metamorphosis has a long and at times uninterrupted history, little werewolf literature was written for entertainment after Ovid and Petronius until the early eighteenth century. Scientific interest in lycanthropy, however, enjoyed a resurgence in the seventeenth century. Kenelm Digby reported an alleged werewolf case from the Palatinate in 1663, and a werewolf carcass was on display in Ansbach until 1685. Prior to the seventeenth century such transformations were primarily seen as evidence of witchery, and as fictional accounts reemerged in the nineteenth century the werewolf was again tied to supernatural questions. Brown therefore published *Edgar Huntly* at a time when interest in lycanthropy was both scientific and supernatural.

⁹² S.K. Robisch, *Wolves and the Wolf Myth in American Literature* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2009), 8.

⁹³ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 6.

⁹⁴ Robisch, *Wolves and the Wolf Myth*, 208.

⁹⁵ Brown, *Edgar Huntly*, 8-10.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 15-16.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 71.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 71-72.

¹⁰⁰ Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland; or, The Transformation, with Related Texts*, ed. Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2009), 170.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 114, 168.

¹⁰² Brown, *Edgar Huntly*, 72.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Edgar doesn't walk into the wilderness and merely identify Clithero by name because taxonomy is not just about identifying—it is also about creating. To call a thing a man is to make that thing a man, which points to human-animal malleability. It also seems important to note *how* Clithero is restored as a human in this scene. This restoration requires interaction with another human being. Being human, then, requires human society to provide an opportunity for this type of species recognition. This seems important to any political assessment as it relates to a Hobbesian worldview, where in state of nature life is not only nasty and brutish, but also solitary.

¹⁰⁵ This type of social dinner is also part of a long religious tradition in which it is significant to have dinner with someone and “commune” (to share, or to make common).

¹⁰⁶ Gardner, “Alien Nation,” 429.

¹⁰⁷ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 105.

¹⁰⁸ Brown, *Edgar Huntly*, 107-108.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 5.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 84.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 109.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 110.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 111.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 112.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 31.

¹²³ Brown, *Edgar Huntly*, 113.

¹²⁴ We should also keep in mind the transatlantic political resonance of this indigestion. If democracy—the tendency toward equality and indistinction—cannot be contained without violence, Brown’s novel offers a striking commentary on revolution as a lycanthropic transformation that produces upheaval and a dangerous case of political indigestion across the Atlantic world in this period.

¹²⁵ Emerging from the cave ragged and animal-like, his rebirth mirrors the visual exchange of man for animal seen in Clithero earlier in the novel. This becoming-animal is both dangerous and exhilarating. While Edgar goes to great lengths to highlight the dangers of his travels and his abhorrence of the violence he encounters, we also get the sense that he is having the time of his life. His transformation gives him the opportunity to test himself and his limits. For example, he remarks: "I disdained to be outdone in perspicacity by the lynx, in his sure-footed instinct by the roe, or in patience under hardship, and contention with fatigue, by the Mohawk. I have ever aspired to transcend the rest of animals in all that is common to the rational and brute, as well as in all by which they are distinguished from each other." Brown, *Edgar Huntly*, 141. His narrative becomes one of superhuman feats of survival, evading both European and Indian in the process—neither of which recognizes him as one of their own.

¹²⁶ T. A. Fahy, "Lycanthropy: A Review," in *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 82 (1989), 37.

¹²⁷ It is here that Brown’s politics of indistinction become more readily apparent. By shifting from social indistinction to ontological indistinction, Brown sees men who experiment with democracy and radical boundlessness as forever transformed. Men like Edgar and Clithero experience a subjectivity from which one ultimately can’t recover. This seems to map nicely onto Brown’s unstable views on the French Revolution, which is both titillating and dangerous. Radical equality, while liberating, has the potential to turn violent and abortive.

¹²⁸ Brown, *Edgar Huntly*, 116.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 190.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 190-192.

¹³¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 265.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ For more on these "reproductive disorders," see Dana Luciano, "'Perverse Nature': Edgar Huntly and the Novel's Reproductive Disorders," *American Literature* 70.1 (1998): 1-27.

CHAPTER 3

“HUMAN EXTINCTION”

The disappearance of Man at the end of History is not a cosmic catastrophe . . . [a]nd it is not a biological catastrophe either: Man remains alive as animal in harmony with Nature or given Being. What disappears is Man properly so called. Practically, this means: the disappearance of wars and bloody revolutions.

— ALEXANDRE KOJÈVE, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*

In the decades following the so-called age of democratic revolutions, themes of radical solitude and “last man” narratives became so commonplace that Mary Shelley’s publication of *The Last Man* in 1826 met with considerable ridicule in the press. Morton D. Paley, in his essay on the novel, mentions a particular review in *The Monthly Magazine* that suggested “a term should be invented comprehensive enough to include those superlatively late comers that usually follow the last.” He also notes, however, that “behind that derision one senses a certain eschatological anxiety that may account for the virulence of some of the reviews.”¹ This anxiety is not surprising, particularly in a postrevolutionary Atlantic world still grappling with the eschatological question of whether or not democracy marked the next transcendent (and perhaps concluding) stage of the human history. Indeed, the rise of “last man” narratives appears symptomatic of postrevolutionary culture, with a number of authors imagining what it would be like to witness the extinction of the human species.

Yet unlike other narratives that imagine the end of man as a “cosmic catastrophe,” Shelley’s novel seems to ask a more complicated question: If human political systems and histories cannot bring about utopia, is there another mode of being—one not fully actualized—in which the failures of history can be overcome? By setting her novel in the future, Shelley uses *The Last Man* to reflect backward on the desire for radical equality manifested at the turn of the century. Throughout the novel,

she appears torn between the revolutionary optimism of her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, and her own increasing sympathies toward Edmund Burke. This raises the question: Is it possible to outline a politics that is nostalgic for the moralization of her own revolutionary politics and at the same time accounts for it? This chapter addresses that question by pushing back against readings of *The Last Man* as a conservative turn in Shelley's politics; it argues instead for a more nuanced politics of indistinction in which Shelley both accepts and revises Burke—revealing her own repressed desires for radical equality.

The politics of indistinction on display in *The Last Man* place Shelley in a larger Atlantic conversation about radical equality and human extinction. Most scholars who have written on Shelley's novel cite poems by Lord Byron, Thomas Campbell, and Thomas Hood as the most influential "last man" narratives of the period, but, as Jonathan Elmer has noted, in America "there were last men too, most famously, perhaps, Uncas, Cooper's hero in *The Last of the Mohicans*, published that same year."² Shelley was an admirer of Charles Brockden Brown and Washington Irving, and her writings share much in common with an emergent American Gothic.³ Yet while conversations about the transatlantic Gothic tend to focus on the extent to which Brown might be considered a "Godwinian" author, I believe it may be equally appropriate to think of Shelley as a participant in a transatlantic conversation that is—to some extent—rather American. *The Last Man* borrows from Brown in its engagement with plagues and postrevolutionary politics, and in *Frankenstein* and Shelley's short stories we often hear echoes of *Edgar Huntly*.

Though earlier authors, such as Brown, destabilize the category of the human through tropes of somnambulism, lycanthropy, and narratives of immunity, Shelley offers a more explicitly political engagement with questions of indistinction. In *The*

Last Man, it seems that all political systems are ultimately rendered indistinct against the leveling power of nonhuman agencies, such as the plague. Shelley traces a radical democratic leveling to its logical conclusion, thus entertaining the possibility of political and biological boundlessness—even if that possibility comes at the price of human extinction.⁴ Scholarship on Shelley’s politics has often mirrored readings of Brown’s politics in that her name, associates, upbringing, and early life suggest a radical politics while her later work hints at more conservative political views.⁵ Indeed, contemporary arguments about Shelley’s political views have ranged from subsuming her politics within the revolutionary and Romantic politics of her husband, Percy, or her parents, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, to arguing that Mary Shelley was “no revolutionary herself,” in the words of Anne K. Mellor.⁶ Set against the backdrop of political reforms in England, however, *The Last Man* reveals a radical political skepticism not easily categorized.⁷

As I noted earlier, *The Last Man* differs from similar narratives of this period in its treatment of lastness, reanimation, and the distinctions—both political and biological—between life and death. A novel in which political concerns are quickly subsumed into larger concerns about the plague, *The Last Man* demonstrates how all political forms eventually begin to resemble each other, something that occurs alongside the breakdown of social distinctions. For Shelley, this disintegration of political categories and social distinctions can only be imagined by abandoning the category of the human altogether. Whereas scholars have often read *The Last Man* as Shelley’s claim for racial unity and domestic intimacy, I argue that such readings miss the underlying political claims about human indistinction. Shelley challenges not only the boundaries of human communities, but the boundaries of the human self. I see the end of her novel as an attempt to imagine the self as existing in a boundless,

posthuman world not limited by political or biological distinctions.⁸ By placing *The Last Man* in conversation with Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, I explore the thresholds of indistinction between life and death that appear as Shelley accepts the end of human history as the only means by which radical equality can be realized. By opening up a historical boundlessness, Shelley challenges the sustainability of political distinctions over time and demonstrates a speculative historical imagination—an imagination that reveals her own stunted desire for radical equality as she explores the potentially utopian ends of human history.

The Last Man echoes both the political writings of Wollstonecraft and the conservative writings of Burke, and I argue that, of all her fiction, it also offers the most compelling glimpse into Shelley's own political views. Anne McWhir has accurately noted, "the novel's tone wavers between triumph and regret, optimism and despair, perhaps reflecting the political and philosophical mood of post-revolutionary France."⁹ Yet most critics relegate this triumph and optimism to the first half of the novel or ignore it completely, a move that depicts Shelley at best as a disillusioned radical, and at worst a figure who never truly embraced the revolutionary ideals of her family and her youth. McWhir is sometimes guilty of this as well:

Lionel Verney quotes several times—approvingly—from the writings of Edmund Burke, eloquent opponent of the French revolutionaries in the 1790s against whom Mary Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, had written *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. Yet [...] Burke's ideas are no more solid than Godwin's, and Wollstonecraft's disillusionment with revolutionary excess seems more reasonable than her visionary faith in reason.¹⁰

That being said, McWhir does recognize that when Lionel quotes Burke in the novel, he often does so out of context. As such, Shelley's invocation of Burke is less a

conservative or counterrevolutionary turn in her politics, than an attempt to grapple with—and even revise—Burke’s political views from a historical distance.

Rather than simply accept Burke’s claims that radical equality leads to human degeneration, Shelley rewrites the ends of human history to include moments of transformation and boundlessness. I argue that there are a number of ruptures in the novel in which Shelley demonstrates a desire—albeit a repressed desire—to embrace revolutionary ideals and the potential of radical democracy to level political and biological distinctions. We should not, however, mistake Shelley’s desire for the optimism of her mother—optimism is too active a term for what Shelley depicts in *The Last Man*. Yet there is a muted, complicated, and indirect desire for radical equality not present in the writings of Burke. We might even ask if the extent to which she represses this desire indicates that Shelley is frightened by how deeply she is convinced by Burke’s arguments. By accepting his claims about history and human nature, her radical imagination is restrained. Her willingness to entertain the possibility of radical equality amidst human extinction represents a push back against such restraints. To be sure, this is a stunted realization of a desire that lingers despite the fact that she mostly agrees with Burke; she, too, believes radical equality would lead to the end of human civilization. Still, she does not allow herself to approve of Burke’s views directly. Her approval is filtered and deflected through two levels of narration, and often slips into moments of uncertainty.

In this chapter, I explore Shelley’s politics of indistinction from two primary angles. First, I examine how Shelley complicates human/animal distinctions in her novel, with particular emphasis on the ways she uses human indistinction to revise Burke’s vision of human nature and its relationship to radical equality. In this section, I demonstrate how, throughout the novel, Shelley negotiates Burke’s concept of

“second nature” and Wollstonecraft’s views on sympathy to define the boundaries of what is human. Secondly, I examine how political indistinction is made possible through the plague. I argue that the plague and the threat of human extinction make it possible to see how Shelley resigns herself to a Burkean understanding of history yet retains a tempered desire to entertain the possibility of a more egalitarian—even posthuman—world. I conclude by returning to the question of why Shelley frames her novel around Burke. Prompted by the perceived inadequacy of nineteenth-century political systems, Shelley’s politics of indistinction derive from a desire to create a much-needed space for political, ethical, and ontological innovation in an Atlantic world still grappling with the aftermath of the French Revolution.

BECOMING HUMAN: DISTINCTION AND SYMPATHY

To examine how Shelley constructs the human in *The Last Man*, we must first situate Lionel’s animality at the novel’s outset, in which Lionel (a fitting name for an animalized human and potential monarch) explores the boundaries of the human. Shelley frames the novel with Lionel becoming-human and becoming-animal, going so far as to have Lionel quote his own words on this matter in the novel’s final pages: “I had been ‘as uncouth a savage, as the wolf-bred founder of old Rome.’”¹¹ Lionel’s animality at the beginning of the novel prefaces not only his engagement with the human, but also with humanism. He has been banned from the civilized world and lives an unenlightened existence as a bandit. Once he is taken in by Adrian, however, we see him embrace the process of becoming-human: he is educated, admitted to society, and imagines himself belonging to a new world. Lionel returns to a savage and wild existence at the end of the novel, however, where his human boundaries and the “refinements” of civilization die away with the rest of humanity.¹² In this way, Lionel

has always been a posthuman figure; the boundaries of the human in *The Last Man* are defined against his not-quite-humanness, which frames the novel.

When we first meet Lionel, for example, he writes, “I was rough as the elements, and unlearned as the animals I tended. I often compared myself to them, and finding that my chief superiority consisted in power, I soon persuaded myself that it was in power only that I was inferior to the chiefest potentates of the earth.”¹³ Yet his narrative about difference—whether across species or within species—as a difference in power quickly shifts. In describing his ban from society, Lionel distinguishes the human from the animal by stressing refinement, education, and feeling. He goes on to say, “Thus untaught in refined philosophy, and pursued by a reckless feeling of degradation from my true station in society, I wandered among the hills of civilized England as uncouth a savage as the wolf-bred founder of old Rome.”¹⁴ Lionel describes himself as wolf-like, and, fittingly, his sole companion is a trusty dog that watches over his sheep. Early on, he equates wildness with freedom, writing, “years only added fresh love of freedom, and contempt for all that was not as wild and rude as myself.”¹⁵ He tells us, “my life was like that of an animal, and my mind was in danger of degenerating into that which informs brute nature.”¹⁶ Lionel retains a sense of his humanity even as he sees the potential to lose that distinction, and he recognizes that his life is at a moment of crisis: “I stood on the brink of manhood; passions, strong as the trees of a forest, had already taken root within me, and were about to shadow with their noxious overgrowth, my path of life.”¹⁷ As he encounters Adrian for the first time, Lionel stands not only between the animal and the human, but also between the child and the man.

All this changes after he meets Adrian, when Lionel notes, “I seemed about to begin life anew.”¹⁸ Here we see his exile lifted, as Adrian not only permits him entrance

into the society he was previously denied, but Lionel also finds his life-blood stirred—he is literally quickened and born again. The removal of this ban from civilized life allows him access to human subjectivity and society, and it reanimates him by allowing him to refine and repress the animal qualities he previously admired. His admission to society becomes an interesting inversion of the Hobbesian state of nature, for as Lionel notes, “the trim and paled demesne of civilization, which I had before regarded from my wild jungle as inaccessible, had its wicket opened by [Adrian]; I stepped within, and felt, as I entered, that I trod my native soil.”¹⁹ Whereas Hobbes would imagine the state of nature as one’s “native soil,” Lionel imagines civilization as his native soil.²⁰ This civilizing process demonstrates Shelley’s awareness of the constructed boundaries of the human, as it is only after Lionel returns to civilization from exile that he discovers how “brutish, savage, and worthless” he had been previously.²¹ In perhaps his most telling confession, Lionel writes, “I now began to be human. I was admitted within the sacred boundary which divides the intellectual and moral nature of man from that which characterizes animals.”²² With the ban from civilization fully lifted, Lionel begins to define himself against his previous state, and finally imagines himself as human.

For Lionel, becoming human is becoming an historical being, or developing what Burke calls man’s “second nature.” For Burke, “life itself” is political life, and Lionel’s admission to society and introduction to English history, manners, and customs (even at the hands of a republican idealist like Adrian) is what truly separates him from his savage, animalistic self. Shelley offers hints throughout the text that Burke’s notion of a “second nature”—a nature shaped by history, customs, and conventions—is an essential distinction between the human and the animal. This would seem to be in line with Burke’s own thoughts on human nature, according to

which man's so-called "first nature" (or human nature) necessarily entails his "second nature" as he becomes a citizen, or member of society. The loss of the second nature—what Burke feared of the French Revolution—leads to savagery. For Burke, this in turn entails the loss of the first nature; man is no longer human following a radical democratic revolution, but instead becomes "unnatural" and "monstrous." It is in this context that Shelley's engagement with Burke becomes telling. As her narrative opens, we see a man who has been banished from society—he retains his first nature and the form of humanity, but is cut off from heritage, custom, history, and convention.

Yet these human/animal distinctions break down near the end of the novel as Lionel revisits his animal nature. Wandering through Italy as the last man, he writes, "I fed like a wild beast, which seizes its food only when stung by intolerable hunger. I did not change my garb, or seek the shelter of a roof, during all those days."²³ He acknowledges later that he had to conquer his "repugnance" at sleeping in human habitations. After wandering for some time, Lionel is startled as he enters a saloon: "I started—I looked again with renewed wonder. What wild-looking, unkempt, half-naked savage was that before me?"²⁴ He quickly realizes that he is staring at himself in a mirror, although his human form has become nearly indistinct from that of an animal. For a moment he considers remaining thus, but ultimately decides to keep up human appearances—a nod, perhaps, to the fact that the human form itself is constructed. In this state, Lionel writes that he "now found the hardships and lawlessness of my youth turn to account."²⁵ Yet, even as his former life becomes useful to his survival, Lionel also finds himself less and less familiar. He writes, "my hair has become nearly grey—my voice, unused now to utter sound, comes strangely to my ears. My person, with its human powers and features, seem to me a monstrous excrescence of nature."²⁶ Ultimately, Lionel bids farewell to civilized life, and acknowledges that

human cities—such as Constantinople—“belonged to another state of existence from my present one.”²⁷ Although he does not necessarily become animal at this point, it is clear that he has left humanity behind.

The apocalyptic rhetoric at the end of the novel eventually produces in Lionel an altered echo of the savage self he describes at the novel’s outset.²⁸ The threat of human extinction leads us, in Lionel’s case, to return to the not-quite-human. His narrative ends with him losing his voice, becoming nearly unrecognizable (visually) as a human, and roaming about with an animal companion. In the end, we might ask not only if Lionel is human, but—as Lynn Festa writes of Robinson Crusoe—if “he does not quite know his own edges.”²⁹ Indeed, Lionel compares his failure to recognize his own form to a troubled dream as he writes, “[I] felt myself as much changed as if I had transmigrated into another form, whose fresh sensorium and mechanism of nerves had altered the reflection of the apparent universe in the mirror of mind.”³⁰ Here we might draw a comparison between Lionel and the protagonist in Brown’s *Edgar Huntly*—at least with regard to their transformative potential. Both Shelley and Brown take seriously the transformative possibilities of moving between the human and the animal, and, in this case, the move from the animal to the human is what allows Lionel to recognize himself *as* human. And, as we saw in Brown, we see the space between life and death associated with sleep, a zone of indistinction between consciousness and mere animal mechanism. Lionel becomes human as he forgets his animality as little more than a “troubled dream.” Forgetting forms part of his becoming-animal by novel’s end—he forgets the passage of time, the sound of his voice, and the contours of his own reflection. We might also tie forgetting to the erasure of human history at the novel’s end; in bidding farewell to customs and history, Lionel throws off his second nature and—as far as Burke is concerned—his humanity.

Forgetting not only enables transformation and indistinction; it also serves as a survival mechanism for Lionel later in the novel. Lionel survives and becomes a witness and an author. In his study of apocalyptic literature, James Berger writes, “the survivor has seen, and knows, what no one else could see and know. This authority of knowledge, or ‘epistemic privilege,’ confers a kind of ethical authority[;] the survivor’s knowledge is often knowledge of a radical transgression of moral boundaries.”³¹ Writing is also a sympathetic act that allows him to exist as a human; through writing, Lionel might be said to tap into what Adrian describes later as having “felt his life mingle with the universe of existence.”³² As Lionel begins writing, he notes, “as my authorship increased, I acquired new sympathies and pleasures. I found another and a valuable link to enchain me to my fellow-creatures; my point of sight was extended, and the inclinations and capacities of all human beings became deeply interesting to me.”³³ Documenting his own history unites him with other humans, just as his reading gives him access to the customs and conventions of his society. When he ceases to write at the end of the novel—when he ceases to engage with the customs and histories of his species—he brings about the true end of human history.

As Lionel becomes human, he writes, “I was at once startled and enchanted by my sudden extension of vision, when the curtain, which had been drawn before the intellectual world, was withdrawn.”³⁴ His perceptions increase, and he claims to see the universe “not only as it presented itself to my outward senses,” but filled with poetry, philosophy, and new classifications (or distinctions). These new perceptions “awoke the sleeping ideas in my mind, and gave me new ones.”³⁵ Lionel becomes human, in part, as he gains the ability to construct and recognize distinctions in the world around him. By the end of the novel, however, we learn that these perceptions are limited. It is only by embracing indistinction and the possibility of something after

the human that Lionel can imagine radically new sympathies and perceptions. Like Edgar Huntly, Lionel finds sympathy in writing, and a near-compulsion to do so. He not only reiterates the importance of perception to his humanity, but also begins to think about the role of sympathy in becoming-human. The politics of indistinction, then, might involve removing human limits to perception and opening up a space in which new access to sympathies might be gained. By deconstructing the human and extending Lionel's "point of sight," Shelley entertains new possibilities for fellow-feeling that extend beyond what her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, called the "artificial sympathies" of Burkean customs and hierarchies.

Lionel's transformation is only the first act in what I argue is Shelley's desire for a universal, authentic sympathy. Lionel's becoming-human early in the novel depicts sympathy as a movement toward the human, not beyond it. What is interesting, however, is that while sympathy is an important aspect of being human, it is also socially constructed. Shelley works against Adam Smith and the eighteenth-century argument that sympathy is inborn. Lionel can be human—in form, at least—without being responsive to the feelings that most people think make us human. In her depiction of Lionel, Shelley doesn't appear to believe that humans are born with an innate ability to imagine the misfortunes or happiness of others. Lionel partakes of the "artificial sympathies" despised by Wollstonecraft, even though these sympathies get dismantled when he becomes animal (or not-quite-human) again at the novel's end. Shelley admits the artificiality of these sympathies, but still—as Burke does—imagines an altered return to the savage as history is cast off at the novel's end.

Shelley's interest in constructions of human sympathy is also made clear in the depictions of Lionel and Perdita early in the novel, who have both been cut off from human intercourse. Whereas Lionel seems to desire a sympathy he has been denied,

Perdita actively rejects human sympathy—her name (which means “lost”) in some ways points to this, signaling that she is lost from humanity. Lionel, on the other hand, writes about himself as a shepherd, “there was freedom in it, a companionship with nature, and a reckless loneliness; but these, romantic as they were, did not accord with the love of action and desire of human sympathy, characteristic of youth.”³⁶ So, at least for Lionel, the *desire* for sympathy is inborn, and essential to youth. While describing himself before encountering Adrian, Lionel notes that he has taken the form of a man, as he “had shot up in appearance to man’s estate.”³⁷ Yet he also notes, “my skin was embrowned by the sun: my step was firm with conscious power. I feared no man and loved none. In after life I looked back with wonder to what I then was.”³⁸ Here, although he has taken upon himself the form and appearance of man and desires human sympathy, he is enchained to human society by neither fear or love. His passionate desire for sympathy is perhaps most clearly expressed when, in his attempt to poach Adrian’s lands, Lionel remarks, “he feels me now.”³⁹

Lionel and Adrian are eventually united by a past sympathy between their fathers, one which Lionel feels was violated and Adrian hopes to restore by establishing friendship. Adrian’s efforts are in line with his depiction as the most sympathetic character in the novel. Even at the outset, Adrian displays sympathies not only with his fellow humans, but with the entire world:

Adrian felt that he made a part of the great whole. He owned affinity not only with mankind, but all nature was akin to him; the mountains and sky were his friends; the winds of heaven and the offspring of the earth his play-mates; while he the focus only of this mighty mirror, felt his life mingle with the universe of existence. His soul was sympathy.⁴⁰

Indeed, even as national and religious distinctions break down later in the novel as a

result of the plague, Adrian—in an attempt to quell an uprising—calls for a universal sympathy—a fellow-feeling only made possible by eliminating the distinctions of human society. We see, for instance, Adrian commenting on the shared humanity of Turks and Greeks: “The Turks are men; each fibre, each limb is as feeling as our own, and every spasm, be it mental or bodily, is as truly felt in a Turk’s heart and brain, as in a Greek’s.”⁴¹ By focusing on the shared forms and feelings of these men, Adrian deemphasizes apparent distinctions between men based on national or ethnic identities. Adrian continues, “Think you, [...] I did not feel in every nerve the cry of a fellow being? They were men and women, the sufferers, before they were Mahometans, and when they rise turbanless from the grave, in what except their good or evil actions will they be the better or worse than we?”⁴² By invoking Mahometans, Adrian invokes human sympathy for “fellow beings” even though these men are widely considered savage because of their religion, thus erasing the distinctions between self and other. Here, indistinction appears to make fellow-feeling possible.

By extending sympathies beyond what is customary—and at times beyond species boundaries—Shelley aligns herself with her mother, who argued that the customs and systems of “chivalry” which Burke lauded were basically systems of artificial feelings. Shelley demonstrates through Lionel a willingness to entertain the necessity of both sympathies and customs in becoming-human, yet also recognizes that sympathies and customs are artificial and merely constructed. In this way, Shelley shares her mother’s pessimism toward Burkean chivalry and social order, as she acknowledges that human society creates only artificial feelings—or false sympathies.⁴³ Lionel—who apparently embraces new sympathies as he becomes human—recognizes these limits to human sympathy, even in death. He writes, “other nations have a fellowship in death; but we, shut out from all neighborhood, must bury

our own dead.”⁴⁴ Although the development of political systems and nation-states might create a sense of neighborhood, it also leads to isolation for the English. As England perishes, it becomes even more apparent that they are geographically and politically isolated from the fellow-feeling of other humans. And even as the plague produces a leveling effect that breaks down many of the barriers of wealth and class, Lionel notes, “the intimate sympathy generated by similar hopes and fears, similar experience and pursuits, was wanting.”⁴⁵ Here Lionel seems to believe that there is no fellowship in death, even as rendering humans equal through the plague appears to generate authentic sympathies elsewhere in the novel.

What happens at the end of the novel, then, might be read as a failed turn to the utopian—and here I invoke Frederic Jameson’s claim that “the best Utopias are those that fail the most comprehensively”—in the form of Lionel’s return to a “savage” and “wild” nature.⁴⁶ The end of the novel, where Lionel’s surprise at his own image in the mirror is coupled with surprise at the sound of his own human voice, has often been read as a moment of regression, but I would like to argue that it has more radical potential as a failed utopia.⁴⁷ Rather than representing what Burke saw as the degenerative nature of human indistinction, Lionel’s status as not-quite-human at the novel’s end allows him to witness human extinction and the realization (however tragic) of radical equality. In his final pages, Lionel refers to the relics of human civilization as belonging to “another state of existence from my present one” and thus abandons them to set out with his dog.⁴⁸ It is in this ability to imagine a change of state (or a destabilization of the category of the human) that I find a repressed desire for equality in Shelley’s novel, despite its clearly pessimistic themes.

RADICAL LEVELING: POLITICS AND THE PLAGUE

Lionel's becoming human at the novel's outset represents not simply a move from the animal to the human, but also his entrance into political life. Even while a shepherd, he clearly harbored dreams of distinction, although such dreams lacked specific goals.⁴⁹ Bound by the limited perceptual capacities of his animality, Lionel claims to have led a somewhat apolitical life: "I lived far from the busy haunts of men, and the rumour of wars or political changes came worn to a mere sound, to our mountain abodes."⁵⁰ This, too, changes when he meets Adrian and gains admission to civilized life. Of the political landscape at the time of their first encounter, we learn that Adrian's father, the last of England's kings, had abdicated his throne and that "a republic was instituted" in the year 2073. Despite the monarchical desires of his mother, Adrian "was addicted to study, and imbued beyond his years with learning and talent . . . he had already begun to thwart his mother's views, and to entertain republican principles."⁵¹ At least in his early years, Adrian had a utopian view of republican government.⁵² But Adrian refers to these theories as "an almost-forgotten dream."⁵³ Adrian blames his health for no longer pursuing these theories, yet later in the text he alters his political views with the arrival of the plague. When Adrian defends his nomination for deputy to the Lord Protector, Lionel writes: "No one had ever before heard Adrian allude to the rights of his ancestors." Adrian himself says, "This is my post: I was born for this—to rule England in anarchy . . . my mother, the proud queen, instilled early into me a love of distinction."⁵⁴ To some extent, Adrian appears to abandon his utopian republican plans due to a love of distinction.

Of the various political efforts/visions that fail in Shelley's novel, none fails more spectacularly than Raymond's. After being installed as Lord Protector with the

support of Adrian and Lionel, “Raymond was occupied in a thousand beneficial schemes” on behalf of his countrymen. Lionel describes his utopian efforts in detail:

Canals, aqueducts, bridges, stately buildings, and various edifices for public utility, were entered upon; he was continually surrounded by projectors and projects, which were to render England one scene of fertility and magnificence; the state of poverty was to be abolished; men were to be transported from place to place almost with the same facility as the Princes Houssain, Ali, and Ahmed, in the Arabian Nights. The physical state of man would soon not yield to the beatitude of angels; disease was to be banished; labour lightened of its heaviest burden. . . . The arts of life, and the discoveries of science had augmented in a ratio which left all calculation behind; food sprung up [...] spontaneously— machines existed to supply with facility every want of the population.⁵⁵

Shelley clearly sets up Raymond with utopian ambitions, as his vision seems prepared to usher in a new era of human society. Indeed, even as Lionel acknowledges that there were still evils in this society, he also claims that “Raymond was to inspire them with his beneficial will, and the mechanism of society, once systematised according to faultless rules, would never again swerve into disorder.”⁵⁶ Raymond’s utopian political vision here is clearly influenced by Enlightenment ideals, and his brand of republicanism at times aligns with the radical political agendas of Enlightenment thinkers of this period, such as Godwin. The references to science, calculation, and technological advancements reflect the effects of Enlightenment thought as they fused with utopian enthusiasm in the nineteenth century. The prospects raised by the democratic revolutions in the Atlantic world stirred intellectuals to consider what types of new societies might be constructed, and afforded thinkers a chance to inject utopian ideals into social institutions. Raymond’s projects reflect this utopian impulse.

Yet despite claims that disease would soon be banished, Raymond's utopian projects fail, initially due to his own moral failings, and later due to the arrival of the plague. With the plague comes a leveling power that brings about an even more radical politics, freed from the humanist constraints of Enlightenment thought. To better understand the plague as a necessary catalyst for Shelley's narrative, I want to propose that the plague ultimately serves Shelley in ways similar to how the yellow fever epidemic served Brown in *Arthur Mervyn* and *Ormond*: it becomes a vehicle for Shelley's commentary on humanity, political institutions, and democracy.⁵⁷ We might ask why Shelley chooses to replace political rivals with the plague in *The Last Man*, particularly when a political figure like Ryland seemingly embraces the radical leveling of social and class distinctions brought about by the plague. Ryland's political plans are perhaps the most affected by the plague, although the plague ultimately leads to a type of radical equality similar to that which he professes. When confronted by the plague, Ryland is forced to abandon his equalizing plans.⁵⁸

Shelley's novel embraces a Burkean argument that radical equality can't (or shouldn't) be achieved by human means, such as a violent political revolution that dismantles established social hierarchies. Yet, even as Shelley embraces Burke's argument that revolutionaries—the French in this case—can't simply dismiss or ignore history, she engages only hesitantly with a Burkean politics of distinction and more often than not reveals a desire for democratization and a more radical politics of indistinction. Like Burke, she recognizes that radical equality may signal the end of human history, but she does not back away from this prospect—she actually pursues radical equality to the point of human extinction in the novel. Even as her characters share Burke's pessimistic view of human plasticity (as seen in their frequent rejection of materialism), she also uses the plague to propel man beyond his usual boundaries

through natural means. In this way, the plague opens up new possibilities for human indistinction and even plays (albeit briefly) with the possibility of a posthuman world.

As I've mentioned, the plague radically upsets the political views of several characters. The democratic Ryland is compelled to reinforce aristocracy and privilege in order to govern during the plague. Adrian, the early republican champion, steps in to "rule England in anarchy" by invoking his ancestral right through the former monarchical system. And Raymond, who originally envisioned himself as the restorer of the monarchy, uses his inability to rule as an excuse to abandon his position and head off to war on behalf of another sovereign nation. It is in this role that Raymond sacks Constantinople, literally opening the gates of the city to release the plague on the western world. As the most flawed (and perhaps most brilliant) character, we find that Raymond's political life is tied to his moral life and its failure. The idealism of his relationship with Perdita and his utopian projects fails, and his death represents the death of idealism. By opening the gates for the plague, the purity of idealism not only gets contaminated, but the contamination spreads—the political idealism of Ryland and Adrian also dies as the plague ravages England.

The leveling progress of the plague is not, however, merely a commentary on the inadequacy of political institutions; the plague also opens up the possibility to think beyond the human. Encountering the plague, for example, makes an otherwise sickly Adrian into a temporarily reanimated being.⁵⁹ Lionel's recovery from the plague also makes him feel more than human.⁶⁰ The plague thus enables forms of transformation beyond a simple human-animal dichotomy, one that includes alternative temporalities and even regeneration. As Lionel notes, in the winter, freed from the plague, "we became ephemera, to whom the interval between the rising and setting sun was as a long drawn year of common time," while in the spring "man seemed to regenerate."⁶¹

The plague also makes Raymond and Evadne formless—indistinct from other beings and the environment around them—and leads Lionel and his friends to speculate on what might come after human extinction.

In addition, the plague opens up new perceptions—at least to Lionel, who is able to look back on human history as the last man. He writes:

The vast annihilation that has swallowed all things—the voiceless solitude of the once busy earth—the lonely state of singleness which hems me in, has deprived even such details [accounts by Boccaccio, Brown, and Defoe] of their stinging reality, and mellowing the lurid tints of past anguish with poetic hues, I am able to escape from the mosaic of circumstance, by perceiving and reflecting back the grouping and combined colouring of the past.⁶²

Here, new perceptions of the past—perceptions Lionel can only obtain as the last man—render the annihilation and voiceless solitude of these scenes poetic. He continues, “time and experience have placed me on an height from which I can comprehend the past as a whole . . . a picture in whose very darkness there will be harmony.”⁶³ We should question, however, whether this expanded view of the past is human perception. As last man, devoid of fellow beings and fellow-feeling, Lionel has already become something other than human.

Lionel laments, “I alone bore human features; I alone could give articulation to thought. . . . The wild and cruel Caribbee, the merciless Cannibal—or worse than these, the uncouth, brute, and remorseless veteran in the vices of civilization, would have been to me a beloved companion.”⁶⁴ Not only does he imagine the most inhuman of his species as a desired companion, he also notes, “his nature would be kin to mine; his form cast in the same mould; human blood would flow in his veins; a human sympathy must link us for ever.”⁶⁵ Here, Lionel seems to rethink sympathy as

something that is innate, biological, entrapped in human form, in contrast to Shelley's apparent rejection of Adam Smith. The beings he describes are nothing like him, except in form. Lionel then curses the various forms of life left, only to repent quickly of those thoughts. He writes:

Ah, no! I will discipline my sorrowing heart to sympathy in your joys; I will be happy, because ye are so. Live on, ye innocents, nature's selected darlings; I am not much unlike to you. Nerves, pulse, brain, joint, and flesh, of such I am composed, and ye are organized by the same laws. I have something beyond this, but I will call it a defect, not an endowment, if it leads me to misery, while ye are happy.⁶⁶

Lionel explicitly seeks cross-species sympathy here, while also acknowledging that sympathy is something constructed; he can discipline himself to be sympathetic. We also get an interesting materialist explanation of why this sympathy is possible: humans and animals are formed of the same materials and by the same laws.

While the leveling power of the plague ultimately destroys human life, it is not rejected outright by Shelley (via Lionel). Indeed, there are a number of moments in which Lionel appears to praise this newfound equality: "We were all equal now; but near at hand was an equality still more levelling [*sic*], a state where beauty and strength, and wisdom, would be as vain as riches and birth."⁶⁷ Moreover, the plague reveals that they were always equal. Lionel recognizes human death as the ultimate leveling power. Thus the plague becomes, to some extent, a utopian force that levels what comes before to create a *tabula rasa* upon which to write a new type of posthumanist utopia. Although the loss of human life makes the plague unsustainable, it manages to accomplish what political institutions could not: a radical equality. In this way, Shelley differs significantly from Brown in her treatment of disease and its

democratic ends. Although we see echoes of Brown throughout *The Last Man*, whereas Brown uses the yellow fever epidemic as a way to reform the boundaries of communities and set up new codes of belonging (not restricted by species, race, or other distinctions), Shelley uses the plague to produce a space free of human customs and communities. For Brown, immunity plays an important role in creating the type of mobility necessary for boundary crossing; for Shelley, mobility only comes to Lionel through radical isolation as the last man.⁶⁸

Echoes of Brown in *The Last Man* are also important in that they point to the transatlantic debts of Shelley's novel and her engagement with the revolutionary politics of a broader Atlantic world. The plague becomes a global interference, creating "a new state of things," and, as Lionel notes, "trade was stopped by the failure of the interchange of cargoes usual between us, and America, India, Egypt, and Greece." The result is "that whole countries are laid waste, whole nations annihilated, by these disorders in nature."⁶⁹ As Shelley constructs the narrative, England becomes a point of refuge much like Philadelphia did in Brown's texts; both sites serve as a home and gathering point for refugees, and both sites are threatened by foreign violence and revolution. The plague situates Shelley's narrative as a transatlantic—even global—story of social and political leveling.⁷⁰ In the novel, Lionel writes, "there were no means of employing the idle, or of sending any overplus of population out of the country. Even the sources of colonies was dried up."⁷¹ Thus Shelley's text offers a critique of the colonial enterprise, a critique that—while not exclusive to a particular political system—aligns nicely with the rhetoric of democracy in this period. The unsustainable practices of colonialism point to the failure of utopian visions of the Americas as a new world space where experimental democracies might thrive. As Lionel thinks about Ryland as potential Protector, he writes: "Yet could England indeed doff her lordly

trappings, and be content with the democratic style of America? Were the pride of ancestry, the patrician spirit, the gentle courtesies and refined pursuits, splendid attributes of rank, to be erased among us?"⁷² Shelley interrogates the questions Burke poses in his *Reflections*. While Burke was able to support the American revolution, he struggled to reconcile that support with increasing revolutionary activity in Europe. He argues, instead, that England cling to and retain its customs and heraldry.

One character who clearly represents the dangerous revolutionary potential of a global plague is Evadne. Much like Martinette in Brown's *Ormond*, Evadne becomes an emblematic figure of radical indistinction. As McWhir has argued, "Evadne's very name simultaneously encodes destructiveness, deception, and devotion. Like Lionel Verney's, her identity—princess, plague, adulteress, artist—remains uncertain and unstable."⁷³ Her formlessness challenges rules about what counts as a political subject, as human, and even as body. Evadne also raises important questions in the text about the operations of the plague and its transmission, about race, gender, and the limits of the foreign. Her ability to cross class and gender boundaries is striking, particularly in her final scene as a dying, cross-dressed soldier.⁷⁴ It is also worth recognizing the ways in which Evadne begins to blur the lines not only between male and female, but also between life and death. When Lionel discovers her dying on the battlefield, it is as if she rises from the dead, only to die again:

I heard a piercing shriek; a form seemed to rise from the earth; it flew swiftly towards me, sinking to the ground again as it drew near. . . . I with difficulty reined in my horse, so that it should not trample the prostrate being. The dress of this person was that of a soldier, but the bared neck and arms, and continued shrieks discovered a female thus disguised.⁷⁵

The formlessness of Evadne up to this moment, along with her ability to disguise her gender and language, makes her a mobile figure (a spreading contagion that represents Raymond's moral failings) and opens up new possibilities for her: she enlists in two predominantly male professions, learns to survive outside of class hierarchies, and ultimately becomes visually indistinct from the world around her. This formlessness is both monstrous and liberating, highlighting the tensions at play as Shelley explores the possibilities of indistinction. Evadne thus represents Shelley's own repressed desires: she exemplifies a radical equality, one that is only realized by rendering herself inhuman and indistinct.

We see a similar formlessness in Raymond, in Lionel's account during his search for the body of his friend: "my friend's shape, altered by a thousand distortions, expanded into a gigantic phantom, bearing on its brow the sign of pestilence. The growing shadow rose and rose, filling, and then seeming to endeavour to burst beyond, the adamant vault that bent over, sustaining and enclosing the world."⁷⁶ Here, Raymond bursts beyond the boundaries of containment outlined in this space. This excess is initially frightening for Lionel, much in line with political fears of formlessness. McWhir describes the work of the plague as "a redefinition of categories, as life is replaced by death, and nightmares, phantoms, and shadows of the past take on greater reality than the illusion of continuing life."⁷⁷ I would argue, however, that the plague is not simply a frightening redefinition of categories, but a promising attempt to abolish them altogether. In Evadne, for example, we don't simply see her within new definitions of class, gender, or nationality: she becomes an indistinct force rising from the earth (drawing a comparison between the plague and arguments for natural equality, perhaps) that prophesies the fall of Raymond and a new order.⁷⁸ Both Raymond and Evadne, in their boundlessness, become the contagion that spreads

across the world—literalizing Burke’s fears of spreading democracy. Shelley also links this contagion to Raymond’s own moral failings, which produces a narrative of democracy as both degenerate and immoral.

As the boundaries between life and death also become blurred during the plague years, we can see in the mourning of Lionel an early engagement with questions about the boundaries of the human and of mortality:

Half insanelly I spoke to the dead. So the plague killed you, I muttered.
How came this? Was the coming painful? You look as if the enemy had
tortured before he murdered you. And now I leapt up precipitately, and
escaped from the hut, before nature could revoke her laws, and inorganic
words be breathed in answer from the lips of the departed.⁷⁹

The relationship between the natural world and mortality seems strained to Lionel, as he imagines (with an odd sense of terror) the reanimation of his wife. Lionel will offer a similar sentiment as he and Idris leave Windsor: “Nature was the same, as when she was the kind mother of the human race; now, childless and forlorn, her fertility was a mockery; her loveliness a mask for deformity.”⁸⁰ Rather than simply adopting a politics of distinction, as Burke does, Shelley envisions a formless world of unlimited indistinction. We could read the novel (and the plague) as speaking directly to a Burkean fear of indistinction. Yet, for Shelley, this doesn’t necessarily lead to chaos or a wild multitude; instead, it brings much-needed perspective to human life. With the introduction of the plague—which represents both death and democracy—we see a more radical leveling than previous political visions could produce.

LIFE, DEATH, AND THE ENDS OF HUMAN HISTORY

As Shelley grapples with the function of history in a postrevolutionary Atlantic world, she continues to explore the role of customs and hierarchies in the face of human extinction. As Lionel departs from Windsor, he notes, “all these objects were as well known to me as the cold hearth of my deserted home, and every moss-grown wall and plot of orchard ground, alike as twin lambs are to each other in a stranger’s eye, yet to my accustomed gaze bore differences, distinction, and a name. England remained, though England was dead.”⁸¹ Lionel refers to these as familiar places, and refers earlier to an “accustomed site” of a tree.⁸² He then says he beheld them “as if all my sensations were a duplex mirror of a former revelation.”⁸³ These passages represent the novel’s habit of transferring terms—of moving vocabulary from the social and political world to the natural world—in an attempt to make us think about how these two worlds are related. The “accustomed gaze” is what allows Lionel to recognize differences and distinctions; it reinforces a Burkean sensibility in Lionel, in which customs form a “second nature.” These customs and distinctions are then naturalized through Lionel’s intimate familiarity with the landscape. The environment does not change, but the historical distance at which Lionel experiences that environment does. Yet as England dies, so do its customs. The threat of human extinction thus brings about a politics of indistinction: Shelley recognizes that indistinction is not customary, and that it prevents the formation of Burkean customs and social hierarchies. Shelley’s engagement with indistinction represents a notable departure from Burke’s claims about the importance of distinctions to history.

On the question of history, it was Shelley’s mother, Wollstonecraft, who most forcefully claimed that Burke’s *Reflections* is an argument “that we are to reverence the rust of antiquity” and in *The Last Man*, Shelley similarly grapples with Burke’s

reverence toward history⁸⁴ While Shelley seems to embrace the impossibility of realizing radical equality through human means, which echoes Burke's argument, she does not show the same reverence for history—and, despite claims by other scholars,¹ she does not long nostalgically for an old-world aristocracy. Lionel looks back upon an empty England near the end of the novel and says: "Farewell to the glory and heraldry of England!—I turned from such vanity with a slight feeling of wonder, at how mankind could have ever been interested in such things."⁸⁵ Here we see echoes of Wollstonecraft, who argued against Burke's deference to "unnatural customs."⁸⁶ Shelley critiques English heraldry as mere vanity, an anti-Burkean move that again highlights the insubstantial character of Burke's second nature. The distinctions of family and rank so cherished by Burke seem vain as Lionel lays his wife to rest. From the perspective of a man facing human extinction, Lionel sees social orders and customs as both uninteresting and insignificant.

As he dismisses the chivalric banners, Lionel describes his wife as a lifeless corpse—almost statuesque. "While looking on her uncovered face, the features already contracted by the rigidity of death, I felt as if all the visible universe had grown as soulless, inane, and comfortless as the clay-cold image beneath me."⁸⁷ Here we also get Lionel referencing Burke and the "sad immunities of the grave"—a comment Burke makes to criticize the French revolutionaries. Burke conceptualizes history (and the sacredness of the past) as part and parcel of the present social order. Shelley would also have been familiar with Wollstonecraft's continued attack on Burke's attachment to chivalry and history, in which Wollstonecraft argues that Burke's depiction of revolutionary struggles as "unnatural" ensured that human beings would "remain for ever in frozen inactivity."⁸⁸ Shelley plays with this notion as she depicts Lionel musing about statues at several points in the text. As he comes to grips with being the last man,

for example, he observes the statues in Rome and remarks:

If those illustrious artists had in truth chiselled [*sic*] these forms, how many passing generations had their giant proportions outlived! and now they were viewed by the last of the species they were sculptured to represent and deify. I had shrunk into insignificance in my own eyes, as I considered the multitudinous beings these stone demigods had outlived.⁸⁹

Shelley divorces the human form—which is “for ever in frozen inactivity”—from the human, leading us to ask whether a world filled with statues is worth inhabiting.

Lionel’s interest in statues in *The Last Man* offers a significant engagement with (and critique of) Burke’s reverence of history during the revolutionary period. In 1792, the Revolutionary Assembly decreed the destruction of statues and monuments glorifying the royal house, and in 1814 there were multiple reports of a mob tearing down a statue of Napoleon in Marseille. For Shelley, a Burkean world of inequality is one enslaved to history. She seems ambivalent about this question as she both longs for the world these statues inhabited, yet feels no sympathy with them—their world is not a civilized world, nor a human one.⁹⁰ For Burke, the experience of monuments and statues is not one of ossified specimens of history, but rather an engagement with fellow citizens and companions in a community of both the living and the dead.

By making Lionel contemplate these figures, Shelley sets up statues as a way to allow her readers to reflect on the distinctions that separate the living and the dead. Clearly Lionel recognizes the distinction between inanimate statues and animate humans: being alive is to see, move, and speak, while the objects before him are essentially immobile, blind, deaf, and dumb. Shelley seems interested in marking out how walking, talking, and seeing establish boundaries between things sentient and alive and things inanimate and dead. These distinctions between the living and the

dead allow the statues to signal a departure from the society of the living. Kinship with statues is a kinship with the dead. Yet Lionel finds it impossible to feel sympathy with them, and can only reflect on their permanence. In their frozen state, they out-*live* the last living humans. The indifference of these statues echoes the indifference of the Countess earlier in the novel, when she is said to have a “total apparent want of sympathy.”⁹¹ Yet immediately after Lionel describes how the Countess emerges from the grave of Idris—“her tall form slowly rose upwards from the vault, a living statue, instinct with hate, and human, passionate strife”—we see the first signs of life and fellow-feeling in her.⁹² The twin capacities of the statue both to define and to transcend the divide between the categories of the living and the lifeless leads us to ask: to what extent is the statue-viewer relegated to the category of the inanimate?

Deprived of motion, the dead are reimagined or re-presented in forms indicative of their new condition: statues. Mourners also become statuesque in their motionlessness, planting themselves by loved ones and waiting for death. This represents a withdrawal from the community of the living, and is depicted multiple times in *The Last Man*. While the distinction between men and statues may seem insignificant, it is important to recognize in monuments and statues a political resonance. Statues stand in for the dead. They become exemplars of lifelessness and the lack of sense and sensation. They are unresponsive. Shelley would also have been familiar with the many myths—Greek and otherwise—of petrification, where we see the transformation of men, beasts, and animate objects into monuments. They also have historical and political significance. In Shelley’s novel, we might ask if the “living dead” have a role to play in defining her politics.⁹³ By blurring the lines between the living and the dead, does Shelley evoke the ghosts of the revolution—a moment of historical trauma? If so, perhaps Shelley’s setting of *The Last Man* in the future allows her to

immediately reanimate those ghosts, thus populating her novel with the living dead of postrevolutionary Atlantic world. Thus she again literalizes Burke, this time in realizing his contract between the living and the dead. Although, as we've seen, Shelley also seems interested in extending that contract beyond the human as well.

REVISING BURKE: REPRESSED DESIRE AND THE POSTHUMAN

Instead of simply accepting Burke's views on distinction, Shelley toys with a politics of indistinction that blurs the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. Even as she appears to embrace his claim that man's second nature limits his ability to cast off long-standing customs and traditions, Shelley ends *The Last Man* with several moments of rupture in which she allows her characters to play—albeit briefly—with the possibility of a posthuman world. As such, we see her break from the Burkean notion of “life itself” as political life. Instead, she hints at the promise of radical equality, even if that equality comes at the price of human extinction. Whereas Burke sees the spread of democracy as unnatural and monstrous, Shelley is able to imagine the natural world continuing after humans have died out, and even allows her characters to speculate on other rational beings that might take humanity's place. Severely tempered by the reality of revolutionary aftermath in England and France, Shelley still demonstrates a stunted desire for radical equality—regardless of cost.

These moments of repressed desire are most evident, perhaps, in the conversations that take place between Lionel and Idris following Lionel's encounter with the plague. As Lionel ponders love after death, Idris asks herself, “now that all mankind is dead to this life, to what other life they may have been borne.”⁹⁴ Her thoughts on an afterlife mix with concerns about humanity's future on the earth, or what she refers to as “the mystery of a future state.”⁹⁵ Yet these visions of an afterlife

are neither millenialist nor religious in nature. Idris is not interested in religious ascension or the great chain of being, but instead in the possibility of a world sans-human. She goes on to say, “what a scare-crow, indeed, would death be, if we were merely to cast aside the shadow in which we now walk. . . . Alas! the same strong feeling which makes me sure that I shall not wholly die, makes me refuse to believe that I shall live as wholly as I do now.”⁹⁶ Death does not represent an imaginary boundary, but a moment of transformation. As Idris defines the boundaries of her own life and mortality, she begins to imagine herself as both less than and more than human, yet always not quite human. The promise of indistinction is that she, or her humanity, shall not wholly die, but the peril is that she will not wholly live as she does now: a posthuman world loses the distinctions that make her human.

As Idris continues to speak with Lionel, they begin to extrapolate beyond their own lives, and imagine human extinction as a collective transformation of (or move beyond) the human. Lionel writes, “we talked of what was beyond the tomb; and, man in his human shape being nearly extinct, we felt with certainty of faith, that other spirits, other minds, other perceptive beings, sightless to us, must people with thought and love this beauteous and imperishable universe.”⁹⁷ This posthuman speculation is a far cry from a world of rigid hierarchies in which Shelley abandons the radically democratic pitch of her early years with Percy. Instead, it allows Shelley to momentarily project a utopian view of radical equality: an unbounded world free from human distinctions. If humans are limited in their ability to perceive the world by customs and conventions, as Burke argues, the only option for moving beyond those limits would be for Shelley’s characters to look beyond the human and beyond human history, even if that means writing themselves out of that utopia. That Lionel and Idris would turn to perceptive, posthuman beings seems like a rupture of utopian optimism

following the failure of human political systems to enact meaningful change.

What we don't see by the end of *The Last Man* is what we have come to expect in modern utopias—the effort by man to remake mankind for ideological ends. Instead, Shelley seems to be embracing a belief that man has natural ends, while also sustaining some measure of desire for a future filled with new perceptions and consciousnesses. Yet Shelley is only able to toy with the possibility of a posthuman world as the political alternatives to monarchy, democracy, and other human systems have been exhausted. Indeed, for all the looking back that Lionel and others do throughout the novel, there is never a sense that man would—or should—return to old political forms. Indeed, Lionel writes as he leaves England, “we saw depart all hope of retrieving our ancient state—all expectation, except the feeble one of saving individual lives from the wreck of the past.”⁹⁸ While literally referring to England as the geographic and political space being abandoned, Lionel also seems to be thinking about the biological state of being human as well. His reference to England and its civilizations as the “wreck of the past” seems telling as a commentary on the inability of human systems to produce a true utopia. Here we see Shelley's clearest break from Burke. While she tentatively accepts that humans can't be severed from customs without losing their humanity, her repressed desire for radical equality prevents her from calling for a return to old political systems.

That being said, Lionel is not free from nostalgia. In fact, he momentarily adopts a tone of desperation near the end of the novel, as he bemoans the impending extinction of the species: “We must all die; nor leave survivor nor heir to the wide inheritance of earth. We must all die! The species of man must perish; his frame of exquisite workmanship; the wondrous mechanism of his senses; the noble proportion of his godlike limbs; his mind, the throned king of these; must perish.”⁹⁹ From here,

however, Lionel begins to ask larger questions, demonstrating an historical awareness that extends beyond the limits of his own species:

Will the earth still keep her place among the planets; will she still journey with unmarked regularity round the sun; will the seasons change, the trees adorn themselves with leaves, and flowers shed their fragrance, in solitude? Will the mountains remain unmoved, and streams still keep a downward course towards the vast abyss; will the tides rise and fall, and the winds fan universal nature; will beasts pasture, birds fly, and fishes swim, when man, the lord, possessor, perceiver, and recorder of all these things, has passed away as though he had never been?¹⁰⁰

Here we see again the emphasis on human perception, its past and its limits. Yet Shelley is also thinking about just how much universe there is outside the human, and beyond human history. Everything that continues to exist beyond the human in this passage is beautiful.¹⁰¹ What remains is not the description of ruins, or extinguished civilizations, but of a utopian—perhaps Edenic—posthuman space (one that fits with Shelley's radical skepticism of political systems). If we continue to think of posthumanism as both before and after humanism, as defined by Wolfe, it seems right that Shelley would imagine the end of humans as if they never were.

That Shelley is capable of imagining a posthuman world is perhaps most evident in description of animal life as the plague wipes out humanity across the globe. Indeed, one of the best examples might be the numerous accounts of nonhuman animals inhabiting human spaces as mankind perishes. As Lionel travels the streets of London prior to departing England, he writes:

No human step was heard, nor human form discerned. Troops of dogs, deserted of their masters, passed us; and now and then a horse, unbridled and

unsaddled, trotted towards us, and tried to attract the attention of those which we rode, as if to allure them to seek like liberty. An unwieldy ox, who had fed in an abandoned granary, suddenly lowed, and shewed his shapeless form in a narrow door-way; every thing was desert; but nothing was in ruin.¹⁰²

Here we get a glimpse of a radical equality, one that demonstrates even domestic nonhuman animals seeking liberty, and animals like the ox inhabiting human spaces. Lionel refers to the streets as “unpeopled” but not ruined; the cities are still filled with “undamaged buildings” and “luxurious accommodation.”¹⁰³ He goes on to imagine that the “tenantless and abandoned” streets “became mere kennels for dogs, and stables for cattle,” for “human being there was none to reply; and the inclemency of the night had driven the wandering animals to the habitations they had usurped.”¹⁰⁴ Shelley is clearly toying with a radical equality as animals occupy human habitations by opening up the possibility for cross-species sympathies. As the novel ends, Lionel seeks new sympathies with animals, nature, and inanimate objects, even entertaining the possibility of a sympathetic relationship to things.¹⁰⁵ He recognizes that human sympathy has limits, and that humans are perhaps not the only vehicle for sympathy.

Still, Shelley remains unsure of the nature of this posthuman world. Will humanity be replaced? Transformed? Will it exist in another state? Lionel writes, “surely death is not death, and humanity is not extinct; but merely passed into other shapes, unsubjected to our perceptions. Death is a vast portal, an high road to life: let us hasten to pass; let us exist no more in this living death, but die that we may live!”¹⁰⁶ The only constant in Lionel’s speculations is that human extinction will bring about a change in perception and new forms. In this passage, Lionel is uninterested in a religious understanding of the afterlife, pondering instead the question of how humanity might pass from one shape or form into another. This ultimately leads to his

lamentation about the historical place (or significance) of humanity:

Did God create man, merely in the end to become dead earth in the midst of healthful vegetating nature? Was he of no more account to his Maker, than a field of corn blighted in the ear? Were our proud dreams thus to fade? Our name was written 'a little lower than the angels;' and, behold, we were no better than ephemera. We had called ourselves the 'paragon of animals,' and, lo! we were a 'quint-essence of dust.'¹⁰⁷

Shelley prefaces this with a similar comment by Perdita as she struggles with Raymond's death earlier in the novel: "Look on me as dead; and truly if death be a mere change of state, I am dead. This is another world, from that which late I inhabited, from that which is now your home. Here I hold communion only with the has been, and to come."¹⁰⁸ Perdita imagines death as a change not only in her material state, but also as a changing of the material world and its history.

We should be careful, however, not to overstate Shelley's investment in a posthuman world. These conversations represent moments of rupture in the text that exist alongside a reluctant acceptance of the inability to realize radical equality through revolutionary change. Ultimately, in these highly-qualified glimpses of posthumanity, I argue we might read *The Last Man* as a rewriting of Burke's *Reflections*. Whereas Burke metaphorizes actual revolution by describing its democratizing impulse as a contagion that will lead to the end of civilization, Shelley turns around and literalizes this metaphor by describing human extinction via an actual plague. The extended demise and lastness of humanity becomes, for Shelley, not a counterrevolutionary argument à la Burke, but rather an attempt to grapple with her acceptance of his notions of history and human nature, while also resisting her own repressed desire for radical equality. Shelley thus inhabits Burke even as she

disinhabits him, and Burke becomes a way of framing her novel even as she employs him to her own ends. Shelley, like Burke, champions formlessness, but does so in a way that leaves open the utopian possibility of radical equality.

Both Burke and Shelley see the collapse of distinctions coinciding with the collapse of old social orders and political systems, and with the end of human history itself. Where Shelley ultimately deviates is in her repressed desire to push for this change despite the necessity of envisioning human extinction to get there. Shelley recognizes that both Wollstonecraft and Burke were engaged in a theoretical imagination in the early years of the revolution, and at a slight historical distance, her vision in *The Last Man* demonstrates the tension she feels between her mother's optimism and certain Burkean views experience has taught her to embrace in a postrevolutionary society. As I've demonstrated, Shelley also literalizes Burke's rhetoric in the end of human civilization as she imagines Lionel becoming-animal as human history and customs fall apart around him. Yet her return to the savage is also deeply romanticized, whereas, for Burke, the revolutionary activity in France only brings about a violent and scary end to human civilization. From a postrevolutionary perspective, Shelley embraces Burke's notions of second nature and history in acknowledging that one can't just erase or ignore history in attempts to enact radical equality. Indeed, she doubts the capacity of humans and/or human institutions to do so altogether, which is why the plague does the leveling work in the novel.

When we consider his later writings, we see that Burke takes on an even stronger eschatological tone as he fends off accusations of insanity. We might, then, with a little imagination, see Shelley's *The Last Man* as a rewriting of Burke's *Reflections* in which Burke himself becomes another "last man" figure—the last defender of social order from the disease of democracy. Certainly the similarities are

there. Burke's fear that civilization will descend into (or return to) savagery is rewritten in Shelley's novel at the end, although she is much more ambivalent about the value of human/animal distinction. Whereas Burke sees Europe exemplifying a state of barbarity masquerading as improvement, Shelley sees this human/animal indistinction as the only viable step towards truly erasing human history and realizing radical equality—even though such a step leads to human extinction. We might also remember that Burke directly referred to the French Revolution as “a plague” and urged “the most severe quarantine ought to be established against it.”¹⁰⁹ We hear these words echoed not only in the descriptions of the plague in *The Last Man*, but even as Lionel directly links the impostor-prophet to a “contagion of rebellion.”¹¹⁰ Through Shelley's novel, political danger develops alongside the threat of contagion from the plague. Shelley embraces Burke's vision of democratization as a contagion that crosses national and social boundaries, but unlike Burke still manifests a repressed desire to see such a radical equality play out in her novel.

So rather than simply embracing Burke's counterrevolutionary arguments for the preservation of distinctions, customs, and history, Shelley literalizes his rhetoric and develops a politics of indistinction that revises Burke's commitment to distinction. One symptom of this repression is also seen in the long, drawn-out end of humanity throughout the novel; the feeling of lastness happening over and over again is symptomatic of this repression. Shelley repeatedly invokes Burke and literalizes the end of human civilization, but her purpose is not to depict a degenerate humankind, but rather to enact a radical equality. This rewriting and reframing of Burke shows her attempt to retain the power of her own imagination—what the narrator calls a world “glowing with imagination and power” in the opening pages of the novel—even if that imagination has been muted by a general acceptance of Burke that she doesn't want

to fully embrace. Burke serves the purpose of demonstrating, for Shelley, the impossibility of a perfect and just human society. Yet the psychological pain Shelley experiences in accepting Burke's views of history and humanity produce her stunted desire for radical equality. As such, her vision in *The Last Man* is neither utopian nor dystopian (perhaps de-topian?); instead, it offers us but a brief glimpse at Shelley's alternative visions of a society free from human distinctions.

NOTES

¹ See Morton D. Paley, "Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*: Apocalypse Without Millennium," in *Keats-Shelley Review* 4 (Autumn 1989), 1-2.

² Jonathan Elmer, *On Lingering and Being Last*, 148. For more of Elmer's work on Mary Shelley, see also Elmer, "Melancholy and Sovereignty in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*" (2009).

³ The influence of Brockden Brown on Mary Shelley, I believe, has yet to be fully acknowledged by Shelley scholars. As Bridget M. Marshall has noted in *The Transatlantic Gothic Novel and the Law, 1790-1860*, "Godwin and Mary Shelley both read *Wieland*, *Edgar Huntly*, *Ormond*, *Philip Stanley* (titled *Clara Howard* in the U.S.), and *Jane Talbot*. Fliegelman states that Carwin, the villain in *Wieland*, was 'a character who would influence Mary Shelley (an admirer of Brown's) on the eve of her writing *Frankenstein*,'" 91n. We also know Shelley read Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* from her references in *The Last Man*.

⁴ This can be read multiple ways: both because democracy challenges the boundaries of the human, leading to no more human category, or also because death itself is considered the great equalizer.

⁵ Mary Poovey sets the tone for current critical readings of Shelley disavowing her youthful ideals and radicalism later in life. Poovey and other scholars often cite Shelley's 1838 journal entry on her refusal to speak out on behalf of political causes: "I am not a person of opinions. I have said elsewhere that human beings differ greatly in this. Some have a passion for reforming the world; others do not cling to particular opinions. That my parents and Shelley were of the former class, makes me respect it. . . . but I am not for violent extremes, which only bring on an injurious reaction. . . . Besides, I feel the counter-arguments too strongly." Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 204. We should be careful not to map this semi-public self-negation too closely onto Shelley's personal politics or read this as an outright rejection of the radical politics of her parents and her late husband. The defensive nature of her journal doesn't always equate with Shelley's self-consciously "defensive" novels.

⁶ Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fictions, Her Monsters* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 86. There are countless critics who have produced similar readings, and it isn't my intention to exhaustively review that literature here. Examples include Paul Cantor, who claims, "*The Last Man* is in many respects conservative in its political implications, as its quotations from Edmund Burke would tend to suggest." Cantor argues that Shelley's novel "seems to have a contempt for modern democratic politics" and "becomes a kind of aristocratic fantasy." Cantor, "The Apocalypse of Empire: Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*," in *Iconoclastic Departures: Mary Shelley after Frankenstein*, ed. Syndy M. Conger, Frederick S. Frank, and Gregory O'Dea (Madison, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997), 200. Jane Blumberg makes a more nuanced claim for *The Last Man*, although her reading leads to similar narrative of disillusionment: "Despite her preoccupation with the political throughout the novel, *The Last Man* remains a fundamentally *anti*-political book. Shelley systematically samples and rejects both conservative and radical political ideals." Blumberg, *Mary Shelley's Early Novels: "This Child of Imagination and Misery"* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), 153.

⁷ Notably, parliamentary reform in England stalled in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution, and popular attempts at reform led to the Seditious Meetings Act of 1817. This act led to intensified political debates as it grappled with the power to define what is "foreign" and the ability to limit the democratic potency of the "swinish multitude" that Edmund Burke and others feared, in a striking echo of the Alien and Sedition Acts passed in 1798 in the United States.

⁸ I am using posthumanism in a very specific context in this discussion of *The Last Man*. Unlike Brown's *Edgar Huntly* or even Shelley's *Frankenstein*, where the posthuman is depicted as something abhuman, in *The Last Man* the posthuman is literally that which comes *after* the human: it is not a degenerate or animalistic form of the human, but a highly perceptive being not bound by human distinctions.

⁹ Anne McWhir, "Introduction," in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1996), xiv.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xxxiii.

¹¹ Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, ed. Morton D. Paley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 362. All future references to the novel will be from this edition unless otherwise stated.

¹² Cary Wolfe's definition of posthumanism as something that exists both before and after humanism offers an interesting framework for dealing with Shelley's novel. Lionel's animality not only demonstrates the human as a biological embodiment that existed outside humanist constructions, but also allows for a decentering of the human that follows the so-called age of democratic revolutions, as the human could no longer be projected as the ideal of freedom and liberty.

¹³ Shelley, *The Last Man*, 11.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 14. This might also be read as a comment on the French Revolution—a sympathetic nod by Shelley acknowledging Burke's claim that the revolution was "savage" and degenerative, by representing Lionel as a wild man, devoid of customs and "rude."

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 16.

¹⁹ Ibid., 21.

²⁰ Here we see an echo of the arguments of Samuel Stanhope Smith about man as innately civilized, an argument that deeply influenced Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft. See Chapter 1.

²¹ Mary Shelley, 22.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 353.

²⁴ Ibid., 354.

²⁵ Ibid., 362.

²⁶ Ibid., 365.

²⁷ Ibid., 366.

²⁸ A number of scholars have written on *The Last Man* through the lens of apocalypse, most notably Morton D. Paley, Paul A. Cantor, and Robert Lance Snyder.

²⁹ Lynn Festa, "Crusoe's Island of Misfit Things," in *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 52.3-4 (2011), 445.

³⁰ Shelley, 24.

³¹ James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 48.

³² Shelley, 35.

³³ Ibid., 120.

³⁴ Ibid., 23.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 10.

³⁷ Ibid., 14.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 35.

⁴¹ Ibid., 123.

⁴² Ibid., 123-124.

⁴³ For Shelley, commerce would be another example of artificial feelings. One example of this can be found in the text: “Our own distresses, though they were occasioned by the fictitious reciprocity of commerce, increased in due proportion.” Shelley, 185. We might read commerce as a fictitious, or false, sympathy—one that cannot endure the plague, just like the artificial sympathies of an old social order.

⁴⁴ Shelley, 196.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 213.

⁴⁶ Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London and New York: Verso, 2007), xiii.

⁴⁷ Lionel and his companions are surprised by the sound of a human voice as they depart England. There he writes, “a voice, a human voice, now strange to hear, attracted our attention.” Shelley, 262.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 366.

⁴⁹ For example: “I was born for something greater than I was—and greater I would become; but greatness, at least to my distorted perceptions, was no necessary associate of goodness, and my wild thoughts were unchecked by moral considerations when they rioted in dreams of distinction.” Shelley, 15.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 15.

⁵¹ Ibid. Adrian’s early political goals are described thus: “[he] published his intention of using his influence to diminish the power of the aristocracy, to effect a greater equalization of wealth and privilege, and to introduce a perfect system of republican government into England.” Shelley, 34.

⁵² This system is mentioned again as Lionel tries to persuade Adrian to seek out the office of Lord Protector of England: “the time is probably arrived when you can put your theories into practice, and you may bring about such reformation and change, as will conduce to that perfect system of government which you delight to portray.” Shelley, 74.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 200.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 82.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 83.

⁵⁷ McWhir argues, “as an agent of death uncontrollable when unleashed, plague remains part of the fabric of the world. It is borne on winds that blow from the interactions of cultures, individuals, ideas, and armies, revealing much about the adequacy of human ideas, institutions, and ambitions” McWhir, xxxii.

⁵⁸ Lionel notes, “Ryland was a man of strong intellects and quick and sound decision in the usual course of things, but he stood aghast at the multitude of evils that gathered round us. Must he tax the landed interest to assist our commercial population? To do this, he must gain the favour of the chief land-holders,

the nobility of the country; and these were his vowed enemies—he must conciliate them by abandoning his favourite scheme of equalization; he must confirm them in their manorial rights; he must sell his cherished plans for the permanent good of his country, for temporary relief.” Shelley, 185.

⁵⁹ Lionel: “I was struck by the improvement that appeared in the health of Adrian. He was no longer bent to the ground, like an over-nursed flower of spring, that, shooting up beyond its strength, is weighed down even by its own coronal of blossoms. His eyes were bright, his countenance composed, and air of concentrated energy was diffused over his whole person, much unlike its former languor.” Shelley, 197.

⁶⁰ Upon recovering from the plague, Lionel writes, “My body, late the heavy weight that bound me to the tomb, was exuberant with health; mere common exercises were insufficient for my reviving strength; methought I could emulate the speed of a race-horse, discern through the air objects at a blinding distance, hear the operations of nature in her mute abodes; my senses had become so refined and susceptible after my recovery from mortal disease.” Shelley, 271.

⁶¹ Ibid., 214-215.

⁶² Ibid., 209.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 350.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 358.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 251.

⁶⁸ One might argue that Lionel experiences a similar immunity, which enables his mobility and allows him to survive. This, however, is problematic in ways discussed by Peter Melville in “The Problem of Immunity in *The Last Man*,” *SEL: Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 47, no. 4 (2007): 825-846.

⁶⁹ Shelley, 184.

⁷⁰ Mellor argues, “In *The Last Man*, the plague is specifically constructed as ‘foreign,’ as geographically and racially Other. It originates in Africa—‘the enemy to the human race had begun early in June to raise its serpent-head on the shores of the Nile,’ where it is immediately identified with the Judaeo-Christian demonic Other—with Satan—and then spreads throughout Asia, conquering Constantinople, laying waste to China, advancing farther east to the Americas, before it turns on western Europe.” Mellor, xxiii.

⁷¹ Shelley, 185.

⁷² Ibid., 174.

⁷³ McWhir, xxiv.

⁷⁴ Here we again see echoes of Brown’s Martinette, who was a revolutionary figure, a cross-dresser, and demonstrated an uncanny social mobility across class and ethnic boundaries.

⁷⁵ Shelley, 142.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 158. We also see corpses referred to as “unknown shapes” on 176.

⁷⁷ McWhir, xxvii.

⁷⁸ As she perishes in Lionel’s arms, Evadne says, “Many living deaths have I borne for thee, O Raymond, and now I expire, thy victim!—By my death I purchase thee—lo! the instruments of war, fire, the plague are my servitors. I dared, I conquered them all, till now! I have sold myself to death, with the sole condition that thou shouldst follow me—Fire, and war, and plague, unite for thy destruction—O my

Raymond, there is no safety for thee.” Shelley, 142. Raymond seems to accept this prophetic warning, telling Lionel, “she has said nothing but what I knew before—though this is confirmation.” Shelley, 145.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 204.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 259-260.

⁸¹ Ibid., 284-285.

⁸² Ibid., 284.

⁸³ Ibid., 285.

⁸⁴ Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 5:10.

⁸⁵ Shelley, 280.

⁸⁶ Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 5:10.

⁸⁷ Shelley, 280.

⁸⁸ Wollstonecraft, *Works*, 5:10.

⁸⁹ Shelley, 359.

⁹⁰ As I mention here, Lionel seeks out—unsuccessfully—sympathy among the statues of Rome. Lionel writes, “[the stone deities] looked upon me with unsympathizing complacency, and often in wild accents I reproached them for their supreme indifference—for they were human shapes, the human form divine was manifest in each fairest limb and lineament.” Shelley, 363.

⁹¹ Ibid., 229.

⁹² Ibid., 282.

⁹³ Shelley opens *The Last Man* with the narrator entering “the gloomy cavern of the Cumæan Sibyl.” Shelley, 1. Shelley was certainly familiar with Virgil’s *Aeneid*, where Aeneas visits the Sibyl at Cumae to learn how to enter the underworld and return alive. Shelley, by invoking the Sibyl, also invokes the blurred boundary between mortality and immortality as she enters into her narrative of the last man. In this regard, *The Last Man* engages in similar questions that haunt both *Frankenstein* and many of Shelley’s short stories: the question of reanimation as it pertains to the boundaries of the human.

⁹⁴ Shelley, 267.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 267-268.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 269. This passage is interesting when read in the context of John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, a text Shelley studied closely immediately prior to writing *Frankenstein* and one which helps us understand her thoughts on a posthuman life. As Lionel and Idris imagines other “perceptive beings” in the universe, Shelley may be invoking Locke’s theory of perception. Locke held that the capacity for perception marks the distinction between animal and plant life, and this capacity in animals was suited to the practical needs of each species. Locke also noted explicitly that other spirits (and here I also hear echoes in Shelley’s reference to “perceptive beings”), who might embody different sensory organs and sympathies, might well perceive aspects of the world of which we are unaware.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 322.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 322-323.

¹⁰¹ We see this again elsewhere in the novel. Lionel writes, “I hid my face in my hands. The twitter of the young birds going to rest, and their rustling among the trees, disturbed the still evening-air—the crickets chirped—the aziolo cooed at intervals. My thoughts had been of death—these sounds spoke to me of life. I lifted up my eyes—a bat wheeled round . . . a herd of cattle passes along in the dell below. . . . Yes, this is the earth.; there is no change—no ruin—no rent made in her verdurous expanse; she continues to wheel round and round, with alternate night and day, through the sky, though man is not her adorer or inhabitant. Why could I not forget myself like one of those animals, and no longer suffer the wild tumult of misery that I endure? Yet, ah! what a deadly breach yawns between their state and mine! Have not they companions? Have not they each their mate—their cherished young, their home, which, though unexpressed to us, is, I doubt not, endeared and enriched, even in their eyes, by the society which kind nature has created for them? It is I only that am alone.” Shelley, 357.

¹⁰² Ibid., 262.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 263-265. Lionel makes a similar observation on the way to Milan: “The dove-coloured oxen turned their full eyes on us, and paced slowly by; a startling throng of silly sheep, with pattering feet, would start up in some chamber, formerly dedicated to the repose of beauty, and rush, huddling past us, down the marble staircase into the street, and again in at the first open door, taking unrebuked possession of hallowed sanctuary, or kingly council-chamber. We no longer started at these occurrences.” Shelley, 336. In this instance, it is noteworthy that the animals are occupying dwellings connected to positions of rank in the political and religious systems of mankind. Lionel also refers to the animals in Rome as a “population” living in the city near the end of the novel. Shelley, 358.

¹⁰⁵ For example, in deciding what to leave behind upon departing England, Lionel refers to animals as “dear friends” that can’t be left behind: “There was the spirited and obedient steed which Lord Raymond had given his daughter; there was Alfred’s dog and a pet eagle, whose sight was dimmed through age. Shelley, 258. Similarly, he comments later in the text on horses who had become wild as mankind perished: “we exhausted our artifices to allure some of these enfranchised slaves of man to resume the yoke; or as we went from stable to stable through the towns, hoping to find some who had not forgotten the shelter of their native stalls.” Shelley, 297. These remarks not only invoke a kind of cross-species sympathy (and inversion of hierarchies), but also comment on a form of species equality.

¹⁰⁶ Shelley, 323.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 290.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 265.

¹⁰⁹ Burke, *Reflections*, 131, 140.

¹¹⁰ Shelley, 314.

CHAPTER 4

“THE INDISTINCT SELF”

My turn to Robert Montgomery Bird in this chapter is motivated, in part, by the fact that he might appear to be a political outlier when placed alongside Wollstonecraft, Shelley, and Brown.¹ Bird was an outspoken Whig, a fierce critic of both Brown’s novels and the Gothic mode, and a friend to Samuel Morton, whose theories of race appear to be at odds with the narratives of indistinction I discussed earlier. Yet Bird is perhaps less of an outlier than he appears. This chapter suggests the pervasiveness of indistinction as a defining feature of political and scientific definitions of the self in the early nineteenth century. Bird’s inclusion in my dissertation also indicates that indistinction can be a politically ambidextrous and intellectually tempting phenomenon: it allows for narratives that can be radical or conservative, utopian or dystopian (as we saw in Shelley’s *The Last Man*). In what follows, I argue that indistinction provides an irresistible vocabulary for Bird as he confronts questions of geographical expansion and slavery, even though he was arguably less enchanted by the American experiment with democracy than the other authors featured in this project, particularly Wollstonecraft and Brown. Whereas many Whigs decried the excesses of democracy in the antebellum United States, Bird stands out for the way in which he recognizes indistinction—which, in many ways, defines this excess—as a central, and often appealing, feature of democracy.

Bird’s *Sheppard Lee* also marks a shift in how we might think about indistinction in the 1830s—particularly in the United States—by placing us in a different political landscape than in earlier chapters. Though borrowed from an ancient premise, the transmigration of a soul from body to body in *Sheppard Lee* complicates social, political, and biological distinctions in ways that are peculiar to an

emergent Jacksonian politics of individualism. This transmigration leads to a politics in which the bounded self becomes permeable and leads (potentially) to madness.² The mobility granted by indistinction and democracy in this period is initially liberatory for Lee, allowing him to engage in cross-racial and cross-species sympathies by imagining an indistinct self.³ Yet the instability of this self also raises important questions about accountability and volition in a nation grappling with its paradoxical investment in democracy and slavery. The Gothic horror of Bird's novel emerges as Sheppard Lee crosses the threshold between man and slave only to provoke a brutal slave uprising, forcing readers to ask who—if anybody—must take responsibility for the violent ruptures of democratic life. By allowing Lee-as-Tom to participate in, witness, and eventually be lynched for his role in a violent slave rebellion, Bird situates his questions about selfhood and volition at the center of antebellum American politics. The permeable boundaries between persons, and even, by the novel's end, between persons and things, raise important questions about the mutability of political categories (including slave-master distinctions) and the stability of the human self. In this way, Bird articulates a politics of indistinction that confronts the young nation's newly democratized sense of accountability for political and historical violence.

Bird's novel thus offers an alternative narrative to Jacksonian politics by making indistinction (and specifically this notion of an indistinct self) central to concerns over human origins and human diversity—concerns that would become increasingly important in debates over the institution of slavery.⁴ Whereas Jacksonian democracy was popular and in many ways egalitarian, Bird's novel both exposes and participates in the masculine privilege and racial prejudice so prevalent in this period. By cycling his protagonist through multiple selves, Bird attempts to get at the lowest common denominator of human life, but ultimately crosses the boundary between

what is human and nonhuman, with Lee moving from landed white men to slaves, then to animals, and ultimately to inanimate objects. The novel then ends by dismissing the entire experience as a mere nervous disorder. On one hand, Bird seems to argue that democracy induces a diseased state of mind that collapses distinctions critical to government and the category of the human. As Lee inhabits each corpse, he struggles to remember former existences. This blurred memory allows the lost bodies and wandering spirits of *Sheppard Lee* to inhabit America in a way that echoes Shelley's wandering "last man"—a figure left negotiating his guilt without a clear sense of the extent to which he is accountable to his country, his family, and himself.

Although I have positioned Bird as a political outlier, he does share with others a political worldview that resists simple classification. His fiction, in particular, makes it difficult to reconcile his hostile depictions of Native Americans, his sometimes contradictory views on slavery, and his political allegiances as a Whig.⁵ Published alongside dominant historical narratives of expansion and the "rise" of American democracy, Bird's written work demonstrates the complicated ways in which early nineteenth-century American politics engaged with English Old Whig ideas, eighteenth-century medical practices, and an admiration for Burke.⁶ For Bird, like many American Whigs of his time, Burke had lost some of his reactionary legacy and was instead being lauded for his Whig reform writings and his rhetorical skills. Bird thus saw Burke primarily as part of a long tradition that engaged with classical forms of rhetoric and eloquence.⁷ Yet unlike other Whig writers in this period, whose ideas often seem fossilized to later critics, Bird also engages in a more complex formal experiment with *Sheppard Lee* that embraces indistinction as a rhetoric inseparable from democracy—thus placing him squarely within a transatlantic Gothic tradition.

If, as I argue in earlier chapters, the Gothic is an imaginative mode primarily interested (at least in terms of content) in the crossing of boundaries and the penetration of unknown spaces, then *Sheppard Lee* (1836), which is not traditionally read as Gothic fiction, represents a generic mixture of satire and Gothic that similarly crosses formal boundaries. While his best-known novel, *Nick of the Woods* (1837), is more easily placed within a tradition of American Gothic novels, Bird explicitly rejected the Gothic as Brown imagined it. Indeed, few critics would describe the satirical *Sheppard Lee* as a Gothic novel at all. Instead, as Bird turned from drama to novels, he often sought to produce historical romances along the lines of his hero, Walter Scott, or his fellow American novelist, James Fenimore Cooper. Yet, as Cynthia Wall has argued, the Gothic need not remain separate from satire or romance. Wall shows that in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), for example, the clumsiness of the Gothic trappings actually function as a "subterranean satire on patriarchal politics."⁸ Too often read as a humorous allegory or psychological picaresque, the clarity of Bird's political satire similarly falls apart (or simply becomes clumsy) in the face of real terror and the immediate political fears of indistinction. As Michael Seidel has argued, satire is also a destructive mode, always caught between "the urge to *re*form" and "the urge to annihilate."⁹ While Bird's novels are certainly indebted to the Gothic as it has been defined throughout my argument, they also demonstrate how the Gothic, satire, and sentimentalism—a mode dedicated to expanding sympathies through the imagination and breaking down traditional boundaries—are often engaged in similar projects through different generic techniques.

Critics, however, have yet to look beyond political satire in *Sheppard Lee*. Whereas Bird's satiric mode at times asks us not to take the transmigration of Lee's soul literally, he still asks us to think seriously about the political and moral

consequences of a destabilized self. Unlike Locke, however, who was asking similar questions in the seventeenth century, Bird does not tie the stakes of selfhood and accountability to religion or God's final judgment. Instead, he seeks to understand accountability in more secular terms. Bird's relationships to slavery and indistinction are particularly notable for the antebellum United States, in which racial sciences were undergoing a dramatic shift. Bird's status as a physician thus marks another overlap between biological and political discourse in this period, and helps us think about how the politics of indistinction remain essential to debates over democracy, even as the so-called age of democratic revolutions grows increasingly distant. Trained in medicine, he participated in a larger conversation about human plasticity that moves past the theological rhetoric of Smith and ultimately begins to codify what we now think of as scientific racism. As a result, his move to metempsychosis shifts the conversation away from the physically oriented debates about race I discussed in earlier chapters to a more psychological reading of human indistinction. Yet despite this turn, property and rank also remain central problems in this text—even as they too become psychologically inflected. Bird's interrogation of the self thus raises a crucial question: Are distinctions essential, or merely circumstantial?

This chapter addresses that question by offering four contributions to my larger argument. First, it identifies Bird as a natural inheritor of a literary history established in my earlier chapters (and an important link between these authors and the later work of Poe). *Sheppard Lee* demonstrates the continued evolution of a Gothic sensibility that emerges out of Wollstonecraft—a Gothic that is deeply tied to a politics of indistinction and questions about radical equality. Second, this chapter situates Bird's engagement with metempsychosis within a longer tradition of interrogating consciousness and argues that this tradition is crucial to understanding political

accountability as it relates to Bird's construction of an indistinct self. Third, this chapter will examine how metempsychosis—which, for Bird, represents psychological illness—raises questions about social mobility. Like Brown, Bird sees that illness offers mobility even as he repeatedly calls the benefits of mobility into question. The chapter then ends with a reading of the conclusion to *Sheppard Lee* which places questions of selfhood, mobility, and accountability squarely alongside conversations about slavery. Decades after the so-called “age of democratic revolutions,” Bird asks us who, if anyone, remains conscious of—and accountable for—its legacy.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND SELFHOOD

Although *Sheppard Lee* is notoriously difficult to summarize, it primarily has been read as a tale of metempsychosis in which Sheppard Lee's spirit inhabits a series of corpses. The novel opens by introducing us to the original Sheppard Lee, a lazy farmer's son from New Jersey who squanders his inheritance. Early on, Lee makes several unsuccessful attempts to regain financial solvency through marriage, speculation, and local politics. As a last resort, he attempts to dig up a buried treasure (as suggested by his slave, Jim, and confirmed to him in a dream), suffering a rather comic death in the process. Awakening as a disembodied ghost, Lee then inhabits the corpses of a number of characters across the antebellum American social spectrum: John Hazelwood Higginson, a wealthy, henpecked Philadelphia brewer; Isaac Dulmer (I. D.) Dawkins, a penniless Philadelphia dandy; Abram Skinner (Old Goldfist), a miserly money-lender; Zachariah Longstraw, a naïve and excessively philanthropic Quaker; Tom, a contented Virginia slave who ultimately helps plan a rebellion on his plantation; and Arthur Megrim, a wealthy Virginia heir and hypochondriac. The novel

then closes with Lee re-inhabiting his original body after he (as Megrim) finds it mummified and on display as part of a traveling medical show in Virginia.

This corpse-hopping helps to establish a premise by which *Sheppard Lee* can engage with ideas of accountability, allowing Lee to inhabit spaces of transformation and indistinction. As discussed in Chapter 2, Brown similarly tackled the question of accountability via sleepwalking in *Edgar Huntly*. For Bird, however, this question hinges on an indistinct self that emerges not from lycanthropic transformations but instead through metempsychosis. Metempsychosis allows Bird to engage with the types of questions of selfhood and association articulated a century earlier by Locke. This link is most evident shortly after Lee enters the body of I. D. Dawkins:

I found myself invested with new feelings, passions, and propensities—as it were, with a new mind—and retaining so little of my original character, that I was perhaps only a little better able to judge and reason on the actions performed in my new body, without being able to avoid them, even when sensible of their absurdity.¹⁰

Writing in the voice of his original self, Lee claims that he can't be held responsible for his actions while occupying other bodies. The body, it seems, invests him with new feelings, a new mind, and an entirely new character. While able to remember what he has done as various characters (thus differing from Brown's lycanthropes), he thus does not hold himself accountable for those actions.

The extent to which selfhood is embodied is a question explored explicitly by Lee during his time inhabiting Dawkins' body. Although he reminds us that he isn't "writing a dissertation on metaphysics, nor on morals either," he also makes it clear that he believes the causes of good and evil are rooted in "causes and influences "purely physical."¹¹ He illustrates his thoughts with the following claim:

Socrates, in Bonapartes' body, could scarcely have been Socrates, although the combination might have produced a Timoleon or Washington. . . . [T]hose sages who labour to improve the moral nature of their species, will effect their purpose only when they have physically improved the stock. Strong minds may be indeed operated upon without regard to bodily bias, and rendered independent of it; but ordinary spirits lie in their bodies like water in sponges, diffused through every part, affected by the part's affections, changed with its changes, and so intimately united with the fleshly matrix, that the mere cutting off of a leg, as I believe, will, in some cases, leave the spirit limping for life.¹²

The language of this passage strongly echoes Locke's investigation of the self in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. As Locke discusses the roles of both the soul and the body in shaping a self, for example, he offers the example of a finger being separated from the rest of the body: "[S]hould this consciousness go along with the little Finger . . . 'tis evident the little Finger would be the *Person*, the *same Person*."¹³ While Locke uses this example to dismiss the idea that consciousness might travel with a severed finger, Lee's metaphysical aside makes it clear that Bird was thinking about the self in a similar vein—as something shaped by both body and consciousness. Lee's description of the sponge-like nature of the spirit also seems to echo Locke's epistemological notion of the tabula rasa, in which knowledge—and even selfhood—is shaped through associations and sensory experience.

Bird's engagement with Locke here is apparent, although Bird is less explicit about what's at stake in making this observation. Locke, in his chapter on identity, frames another question about consciousness that emphasizes the importance of being able to hold an individual accountable for his actions:

But he, now having no consciousness of any of the Actions either of *Nestor* or *Thersites*, does, or can he, conceive himself the same Person with either of them? Can he be concerned in either of their Actions? Attribute them to himself or think them his own more than the Actions of any other Man, that ever existed?¹⁴

Locke asks us to consider the role of consciousness when it comes to accountability. Can one be held accountable for an action one does not remember? An action he or she remembers but never committed? Bird demonstrates a similar desire to understand personhood in this context. Does Lee's ability to engage with Dawkins' memories, passions, and tendencies, for example, truly make him Dawkins? To what extent does this ability make him accountable for Dawkins' actions if he is not, indeed, the same man? Lee makes the case that his agency is removed when he transforms, although Bird is clearly inviting his readers to recognize this claim as absurd. Lee echoes these sentiments again upon occupying the body of Abram Skinner, this time addressing the reader directly: "But I entreat the reader to remember that I had got into Abram Skinner's body, and that the burden of my acts should be therefore laid upon his shoulders."¹⁵ He disburdens his "spirit" of guilt by arguing that accountability is an embodied attribute that should go to the grave with the body. As I will argue momentarily, however, materialist readings of Bird fail to recognize the conflicted self Lee becomes with each transformation. Despite Lee's best efforts to privilege the body over the soul, Bird ultimately depicts an indistinct self that is instead the product of an interdependence among body, soul, and environment.¹⁶

This interdependence, and Bird's inability to establish a stable distinction between the spirit and the body, leads to complicated questions about accountability and volition as Lee makes his next shift into the body of Zachariah Longstraw. Having

jumped into Longstraw's body after the Quaker was violently murdered, he wakes to find himself being buried as Longstraw by the killer, along with the recently evacuated body of Skinner. This confuses him when asked to testify (as Longstraw) against his attacker, for "I knew very well that Mr. John Smith, rogue and assassin as he was, had not killed Abram Skinner, but that I had finished that unhappy gentleman myself." Regarding the assault of Longstraw, he is similarly perplexed:

Whereas John Smith was there only accused of assault with attempt to kill, he had in reality committed a murder; which if I had affirmed, as I must have done had I affirmed any thing at all, I should have been a living contradiction of my own testimony.¹⁷

Here we see the indistinct self as a barrier to Lee's ability to establish guilt or innocence. His ability to cross the barriers between self and other—and between life and death—make it impossible for him to draw fixed distinctions between charges of murder and assault, and between the guilt of his assailant and his own role in the death (or second death) of Skinner. This reflection is humorous, poking fun at both Lee and the legal system, but it also carries with it a very real concern about identity and the ways in which human indistinction complicates the notion of guilt.

The moment in which Lee jumps into Longstraw's body also resembles a scene from another Brown novel, *Arthur Mervyn* (1799), in ways that highlight Bird's interest in the relationship between consciousness and violence.¹⁸ Lee writes:

I lost all consciousness. . . . I came to my senses a few moments after, just in time to find myself tumbling into a hole in the earth beneath the floor of the hovel, with Mr. John Smith hard by, dragging to the same depository the mortal frame I had just deserted. I perceived at once the

horrible dilemma in which I was placed; I was on the point of being buried, and, what was worse, of being buried alive!¹⁹

Like Mervyn, Lee finds himself awakening from a blow to the head, only to be nearly buried alive. Sleep, a liminal state between a conscious and an unconscious state, is mirrored in the ways in which Lee navigates the liminal space between life and death by inhabiting dead bodies. This resonance with Brown's text is important, as Mervyn's violent awakening results from an attack by a West Indian mulatto and invokes the specter of the Haitian revolution—a concern that later occupies Lee's thoughts as he inhabits the bodies of Longstraw and Tom. The violence committed by a racial hybrid in Brown becomes a violence suffered by a hybrid self in Bird.

It is this racial violence, I believe, that leads Bird to ask what is at stake if we are not accountable in other bodies. The question is obviously literalized in *Sheppard Lee*, although it is present in other texts featured in this dissertation as well; each author engages with human plasticity and transformation within a specific historical and political context. For Bird, questions of identity and accountability are tied to the construction of a distinct self, which is why the possibility of indistinction and violence haunts *Sheppard Lee*, infusing Bird's otherwise satirical novel with a Gothic sensibility. Although the novel is framed by questions about Lee's mental stability—which too often leads critics to ignore the philosophical questions that are at its core—*Sheppard Lee* is a text invested in the impossibility of constructing a stable identity. Because there is no permanent record of deeds inscribed on our consciousness, Locke mobilizes the final judgment of God as the only ultimate guarantee of identity and accountability. Bird appears more interested in the secular consequences of an indistinct self on our ability to govern, and to be governed, in a democratic society. The stakes in linking consciousness to actions are more politically present for Bird.

Still, for Locke, identity remains a forensic category that negotiates the relationship between actions and consciousness.²⁰ In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke questions what happens to the soul when humans sleep—ultimately arguing that the soul becomes insensitive, insensible, and inactive. A person wakes up each morning forced to ask, “Who am I?” and every morning that person must reassemble the world around him via associations. Similarly, as we will see with each transformation, Lee awakes from a sleep-like state and has to reassemble his world and his notion of himself *as a self* through associations. This is why Bird, like Brown, turns to sleep and sleepwalking to think about these transformations. *Sheppard Lee* recodes sleep as a liminal state with transformative potential in order to understand Lee’s relationship to the self. Although the transformations in the novel are almost universally described in the language of sleep or lower consciousness, their role in the novel has yet to be addressed by scholars. Let me turn to those moments of sleep-like transformations now.

When Lee (as Lee) initially dies, he declares “[w]hen I awoke from this trance, it was almost daybreak,” setting a precedent for the novel’s remaining transformations, all of which describe waking in terms of waking from a sleep-like state.²¹ It should be noted, however, that this first transformation is the only one in which Lee awakens as a disembodied spirit—the only example of Bird disentangling the body and the spirit in his novel. Of his transformation into Dawkins, he exclaims, “a sudden fire flashed before my eyes, a loud noise like the roar of falling water passed through my head, and I lost all sensation and consciousness.”²² He then describes himself coming to, but awakening to a “great stupor over most of my senses.”²³ Here we see his transformation facilitated by a loss of consciousness. This is then compared to the liminal state of sleep more explicitly when he muses that “these circumstances had

the effect to increase my confusion to that degree, that I felt like one who is asleep and knows it—provided one ever did or can feel so.”²⁴ There is something similar to the sleepwalking and lycanthropy of *Edgar Huntly* at play here: a vague sense or recollection (albeit a confused recollection) of the time that has passed while asleep or transformed. It is passing in and out of this state that produces a confusion of self and creates a space of indistinction in the novel.

The sleep imagery is even more prevalent as Lee later transforms into Skinner.²⁵ After wishing himself into Skinner’s body, he tells us: “I found myself starting up from the bed, as if I had just been roused from sleep.”²⁶ He goes on to write, “My swoon was, I believe, of no great duration, and I awoke from it a new man, as well as an old one.”²⁷ The comparisons between his metempsychosis and sleeping/swooning produce, for Bird, a new man—not just the reanimation of an old one. As an aged character, but also as a result of the dream-like transformation, Lee-as-Skinner testifies that “[m]y eyesight was bad, my hearing indistinct, and indeed, all my senses were more or less confused.”²⁸ This confusion, while rooted in the old body of Skinner, also resembles the confusion he has previously felt as he inhabits the bodies of others. As a confusion of the senses, it points to the role of the body in producing a distinct self. This confusion of selves appears, however, to be short-lived:

[T]he transformation that had now occurred to my spirit was more thorough than it had been in either previous instance; I could scarce convince myself that I had not been born the being I represented; my past existence began to appear to my reflections only as some idle dream, that the fever of sickness had brought upon my mind; and I forgot that I was, or had been, Sheppard Lee.²⁹

Lee's former life now appears to him as a dream or a delirium, something disembodied and indistinct. The language of diminished consciousness is also invoked when Lee enters into Longstraw's body, where he finds himself in a "delirium, and therefore in a measure unconscious of my sufferings" and "lying all that time in a state of insensibility, more dead than alive."³⁰ Like Brown, who refers to Edgar's lycanthropic transformations as a "species of delirium," Bird resorts here to the language of mental illness and lowered consciousness to describe a state of indistinction capable of producing actual physical transformations.

As Skinner, Lee refers to these moments as "privileges of transformation,"³¹ which begs the following questions: What makes these transformations a privileged act? Is this privilege tied to mobility? Does transformation lead to distinction, or is this a politics in which indistinction itself is the privilege—ultimately granting social mobility? Perhaps mobility itself is questioned in *Sheppard Lee*, as Lee never seems to move up the social scale (despite appearances) and seems to doubt that there are actual distinctions to be found as he inhabits other bodies. Yet even as he pitches transformation as a privilege, he immediately undercuts that claim by also imagining sleep, and thus transformation, as a potential waste of time. This is mentioned explicitly by the character of Jonathan Longstraw as he debates the merits of philanthropy with Lee-as-Longstraw late in the novel. He pronounces, "I don't believe the wasting of time to be any such heinous matter as thee supposes; had it been so, man would not have been made to waste a third of his existence in slumber."³² If slumber is a waste, and Bird has constructed sleep as a state of transformation and mobility, embedded in this moment is a subtle critique by Bird of the mythology of distinction and social mobility in antebellum America. He undermines the common

national narrative that mobility and distinction are desirable by depicting the transformations needed to make that mobility possible as wasteful.

This rhetoric of sleep, which enables Bird to think through questions of accountability and mobility, also demonstrates how Bird's novel is closely allied to an eighteenth-century tradition of interrogating consciousness—as Christopher Looby hints when he discusses the similarities between *Sheppard Lee* and the subgenre of “it narratives,” for example. Bird examines the role of consciousness in self-formation by using metempsychosis to question more fully the relationship between the soul and the body. The connection between this relationship and sleep is usefully articulated by Peter Schwenger in *At The Borders of Sleep*, who uses Hegel to examine the relationship between sleep, the self, and consciousness:

We initially find the soul, then, within sleep, from which it cannot be distinguished: “Sleep,” Hegel says, “is the state in which the soul is immersed in its differenceless unity.” If differenceless, then the soul cannot be differentiated from sleep; its awakening is precisely a matter of differentiation, during which a soul becomes a self, conscious of its selfhood as distinguished from what is other than itself: “The waking state includes generally all self-conscious and rational activity in which the mind realizes its own distinct self.”³³

Although Bird is no Hegelian, he assumes a similar view of the relationship between sleep and selfhood. Lee regularly “wakens” from his transformation from a sleep-like state unsure of who (or sometimes what) he is. Where Bird appears to break with Hegel is when he depicts Lee's inability to construct a stable, distinct self upon waking; the soul/self that awakens fails to distinguish “what is other than itself.” Constructing sleep as indistinction and wakefulness as distinction thus explains why

Bird (and Brown before him) relies so heavily on sleep—or at least a lower state of consciousness that imitates sleep—to effect transformation. It is in this liminal state that selfhood and the privileged role of the “soul” get called into question.³⁴ Yet whereas Brown’s interest is in using sleepwalking as a code for species transformation, Bird uses the sleep-like moments literally to transform the self.

I use “transformation” here because that is the word Bird himself uses most often to describe the movement of Lee’s spirit from body to body. Although he is specifically describing metempsychosis, or the transmigration of souls, I think it is telling that he turns to the word “transformation” instead, even declaring loudly at one point that “I am transformed again.”³⁵ I find it striking that he uses word “transform” so frequently, particularly as we think about “form” as the root of “transform” (which literally means across forms). For Bird, the body and the spirit shape each other, mixing and blending as Lee’s spirit hops from body to body. Thus each transmigration is actually a transformation that alters the form of the self. By thinking of these as transformations, rather than transmigrations, Bird removes the shell-like quality of the body from the equation and locates the self in the body, rather than the soul alone. Yet more than that, Bird’s use of this language also gestures to political debates about matter vs. form, discussions that had begun in the seventeenth century. Human plasticity, for Bird, includes the plasticity of the spirit as it is worked upon by the human body. Yet political plasticity is a more complicated matter, to which I will return later in this chapter.

These literal (or biological) transformations of Lee are messy, in ways that Poe found troubling in his 1836 critique of the novel’s portrayal of metempsychosis. While mostly impressed with *Sheppard Lee* (he called it a “jeux d’esprit”), Poe objected to the messy status of the self when bodies and souls came together:

Some fault may be found with the conception of the metempsychosis which is the basis of the narrative. There are two general methods of telling stories such as this. One of these methods is that adopted by the author of Sheppard Lee. He conceives his hero endowed with some idiosyncrasy [*sic*] beyond the common lot of human nature, and thus introduces him to a series of adventures which, under ordinary circumstances, could occur only to a plurality of persons. The chief source of interest in such narrative is, or should be, the contrasting of these varied events, in their influence upon a character *unchanging*—except as changed by the events themselves. This fruitful field of interest, however, is neglected in the novel before us, where the hero, very awkwardly, partially loses, and partially does not lose, his identity, at each transmigration.³⁶

In this review, Poe reveals his own interest in metempsychosis (which appears in at least three of his short works) while also revealing his interest in the rigidity of the self. Bird, on the other hand, is interested in plasticity: a character who changes, who “partially loses, and partially does not lose” himself. In this way, Lee is ultimately able to ask “[w]hat had become of me? That is, what had become of my body?”³⁷ He thus articulates two of the central questions at the heart of the novel, both of which again recall Locke: What is the self, and, what is the self’s relationship to the body?

Looby, in his introduction to the text, recognizes that, unlike Poe, “Bird absolutely did *not* want a stable consciousness at the center of his tale, for he thought that consciousness really was fundamentally weak and unstable, and was controlled to a large degree by its material embodiment.”³⁸ Instead, Looby argues that Bird harbors a “materialist conviction that identity is largely determined by embodiment,”

which likely results from his training as a physician.³⁹ Yet I would caution against overprivileging the role of the body in *Sheppard Lee*. Although Lee certainly makes a materialist argument about the self in his moments of reflection, we must remember that these reflections are some of the most satirical of the novel, and that his narrative often undermines his explicit meditations. Looby contends that “[t]he weak essence of Sheppard Lee . . . only faintly persists through the succession of bodies he inhabits: re-embodiment itself is an event that profoundly—and quite rapidly—alters his consciousness as it migrates from one body to the next.”⁴⁰ Yet Lee is always present, if indistinct, in each of the bodies he occupies. Whereas Looby falls back on a materialist reading of the self, I argue that Bird sees the self existing in more of a Lockean “mixed mode” that allows for both biological and political mutability.⁴¹ There is no distinct, essential self for Bird (although there is perhaps no *tabula rasa* either). Rather, the self is formed in a zone of indistinction mediating between consciousness, embodiment, and the environment.

EMBODIMENT AND POLITICAL COMPLEXION

Although Bird was not an essentialist, he draws attention to Lee’s essentialist leanings in the novel—particularly the ways in which Lee sees biological markers as indications of political affiliations. Essentialist comments by Lee often offer some of the novel’s more humorous satirical moments, yet the comments are also striking because they so closely reflect a growing interest in phrenology and other markers of racial and social inferiority in the 1830s. However, before turning to emergent racial science, I would first like to emphasize that political selves are always embodied selves in *Sheppard Lee*—selves that remain subject to the type of environmental model of plasticity demonstrated in this dissertation from Smith onward.

The novel opens with changing political and social contexts which cause Lee to switch dramatically party affiliation. While this fictional depiction of switching allegiances is humorous, Bird's personal writings hint at a fear that different contexts can lead to switching kinds—particularly political kinds. This can be seen clearly in a letter he wrote from England, addressed to "Dearest Children," in which he articulates a context-based fear of becoming a Jacksonian. It is worth quoting at length:

I see new evidences every day that America is a detestable place, and its institutions odious; though I know our country is a wilderness, and yourselves barbarians, yet, oh murder! oh murder! how homesick I am!—Oh how tired I am! I was never more tired of any doghole in all Tennessee, except one, than I am of the million and a half Monster, London. . . . I was meant for a wild man, though not of the gregarious order. . . . I am afraid if I stay here longer, I shall become a Jackson man! I begin to feel like a democrat, and for the first time in my life to think that God will lead the foot of the poor man to the neck of the rich, and that, in this, there will be justice. I can't look about me here . . . without seeing an evidence of the corruption and misery that follow in the steps of privilege. If you could but look into some of the wretched hovels which make up the mass of London . . . you would become reformers, radicals, agitators—that is to say Jackson men, undoubtedly.

This letter provides an interesting example of Bird making an environmental argument about politics; witnessing the corruption and poverty of England leads him to worry that he would indeed be a Jackson man in a different context. In this way, the physical characteristics of living in a democracy are tied to and/or altered by climate and society in ways similar to what Smith expounded in his *Essay*. This, when

extended to slavery, seems like an important question to address. Bird not only demonstrates a fear of biological transformation, seen throughout his novel, but also a genuine concern about whether he is *essentially* or *circumstantially* a Whig. In this letter it again seems clear that Bird is not an essentialist, although it also appears as if a fixed political essence is something he desires.

This tension between essence and circumstance plays out repeatedly in the novel as Bird (through Lee) explores the political relationship between body and spirit. In one of the most telling passages in the novel, when Lee finds himself musing about the possibility of inhabiting Higginson's body, he compares the uniting of the body and the spirit to the uniting of two political factions:

Why might I not, that is to say, my spirit—deprived by an unhappy accident of its natural dwelling,—take possession of a tenement which there remained no spirit to claim, and thus, uniting interests together, as two feeble factions unite together in the political world, become a body possessing life, strength, and usefulness?⁴²

This union of two distinct entities (the body with the spirit or one political faction with another) into a new body highlights the extent to which Bird imagines the biological as a way of understanding the political. It also emphasizes the ways in which Bird sees selfhood as a politically charged issue. If the uniting of soul and body (or form and matter) is here compared to the uniting of political factions (or bodies politic), Bird implicitly asks us to examine more carefully how questions of biological selfhood map onto larger political concerns in the United States. I will trace this move from bodies to bodies politic in more detail in the next section.

First, however, I want to emphasize the ways in which Bird continues to explore the intersections of the biological and the political throughout the novel. Early on, as

the town hears of Lee's death, we learn how death itself (or the death of the body) becomes a political act. Both parties claim him, leaving Lee with a rather indistinct political legacy.⁴³ Similarly, the death of Lee-as-Higginson leads to public political commentary in the local newspaper. As Lee-as-Dawkins describes it, the newspaper that included a story and editorial about Higginson's rescue of Dawkins

was of a highly democratic character, and the notice was closed by a ferocious warning to the young bug of aristocracy . . . "to remember, when wasting his trivial existence in that heartless society, whose pleasures were obtained at the expense of their worthier, though poorer fellow-creatures, that the preservation of it had cost the nation one of its most excellent citizens, and the world a virtuous man and pure patriot:"—by which I understood that John H. Higginson was of the democratic party.⁴⁴

This passage highlights not only the political tensions associated with class distinctions in this period, but also the loss of political accountability one suffers at death. In the cases of both Lee and Higginson, their deaths led to an articulation of their political views that Lee is unable to recall: "that was a circumstance of which the gout and my wife had kept me ignorant."⁴⁵ Despite lacking political consciousness, certain values are attributed to these characters upon their deaths.

In addition, democracy—or democratic principles—are often engraved on the countenances of those Lee encounters throughout his narrative. When Dawkins becomes concerned about the fact that his uncle is living on Market Street, for example, he declares, "I thought his nose looked more democratic than ever."⁴⁶ Bird is committed to a relationship between biology, politics, and rank—here allowing Lee-as-Dawkins to claim a biological trait as a marker of social status and party affiliation.

Such traits are also explored as Lee inhabits Longstraw's body. At one point he mentions a drunken man who "spoke with the indignation of a freeborn republican, who felt his rights invaded,"⁴⁷ and later says the following about himself:

[U]niversal benevolence was the maxim I engraved upon my heart; I had no thought but to relieve the distresses, meliorate the condition, and advance the happiness of my species. My generosity extended equally to individuals and communities; I toiled alike in the service of the beggar and the million.⁴⁸

As Longstraw, democratic principles are engraved on Lee's heart, leading him to extoll the virtues of equality and an indistinction of rank. Lee-as-Longstraw goes so far as to explain that all professions are equally corrupt, that the alms-house is "a more democratic establishment," and that corporations—as institutions—should be treated on a par with charitable organizations (he advocates a leveling principle) according to the democratic principles that apply to human beings. In a satirical flourish, Lee espouses an equality that extends beyond humans to institutions as well. This flourish, however, masks a very real concern about the boundaries of the human that rise to the surface near the end of *Sheppard Lee*.

Lee goes on to argue more explicitly for a relationship between the political and the biological—what he calls a "political complexion." Disgusted by the ingratitude shown him despite his philanthropic efforts, Lee-as-Longstraw observes that:

[Ingratitude] springs, like a thousand other evils of a worse, because of a political complexion, from that constitution of society which, notwithstanding its being in opposition to all the interests of the land and the character of our institutions, is founded in, and perpetuated by, the folly of the richer classes.⁴⁹

This passage merits additional attention because it refers to a political complexion that owes its existence to the constitution of society—an argument similar to that made by Smith at the turn of the century about the power of societies to affect the human countenance. More interesting is that the variety of political complexions this constitution produces is, according to Lee-as-Longstraw, owing to the folly of the richer classes in society. Here we seem to see a pointed critique not only of those with privilege, but also of the inherited “character of our institutions” they occasion. Bird’s training as a doctor and his familiarity with emergent racial sciences make it difficult to dismiss his use of terms such as “complexion” and “constitution” as mere metaphors. Instead, his invocation of a “political complexion” offers an explicitly political statement that both highlights the power of society to change the biology (or complexion) of men and offers a possible critique of Burke’s politics.

Lee follows this up with another brief political digression from his narrative to meditate on how equality plays out in practice in the antebellum United States:

The poor man in America feels himself, in a political view, as he really is, the equal of the millionaire; but this very consciousness of equality adds double bitterness to the sense of actual inferiority, which the richer and more fortunate usually do their best, as far as manners and deportment are concerned, to keep alive. Why should the folly of a feudal aristocracy prevail under the shadow of a purely democratic government? It is to the stupid pride, the insensate effort at pomp and ostentation, the unconcealed contempt of labour, the determination, manifested in a thousand ways, and always as unfeeling as absurdly, to keep the “base mechanical” aware of the gulf between him and his betters.⁵⁰

Here we see Bird (via Lee) offering a rather scathing critique of the state of democracy in America, calling it a feudal aristocracy that prevails under a supposedly pure democratic government. Yet he also puts this “consciousness of equality” alongside an “actual inferiority” in a way that makes it difficult to tease out his stance. The critique is leveled at those who would sustain a gulf (or distinction) in place based on rank, manners, and behavior, yet the poor only “feel” themselves equal politically. Is the political self in America, then, a fantasy that must collapse under the weight of “actual” (material or social) distinctions that are “kept alive” by the rich?

For Lee, the root of these distinctions is pride, and particularly the pride of the wealthy. It is in pride that he traces “all those political evils which demagoguism, agrarianism, mobocracism, and all the other *isms* of a vulgar stamp, have brought upon the land.” He then points out that “there is pride in the poor, as well as the rich: the wise man and the patriot will take care not to offend it.”⁵¹ The tension between the poor and the rich is founded on the question of indistinction—or one group believing themselves the same as another (thus the two parties are indistinct) while the other holds fast to the distinctions they’ve constructed (embracing instead a politics of distinction). Capturing this social paradox, Lee goes on to submit that “If thou art a gentleman, remember that thy cobbler is another, or thinks himself so—which is all the same thing in America.”⁵² Here the ability to identify oneself as a gentleman (or person of rank) is inserted into a novel that otherwise struggles to identify a stable self, a move that maps questions about individual selfhood onto questions about rank and status. Such a digression about the distinctions between the poor and the rich makes sense in a novel in which social mobility mostly operates in reverse, with Lee consistently attempting to move up the social chain of being (at least until Skinner makes a different type of attempt). Yet the kidnapping of Longstraw, whose non-

economical motivations toward happiness are similarly thwarted, ultimately takes the narrative in another direction.

RACE, SLAVERY, AND POLITICAL METEMPSYCHOSIS

Bird uses the kidnapping of Lee-as-Longstraw as a turning point after which he explicitly maps his questioning of selfhood onto antebellum political questions. The journey south itself mimics the metempsychotic transformations earlier in the novel, only this time Lee is physically transported not just from one individual body (Longstraw) to another (Tom), but from one body politic (North) to another (South). Much like his earlier transformations, Lee is reduced to a lower state of consciousness and deprived of sensory experiences as he travels; he is transported in “a little covered, or rather boxed wagon,” his arms and legs secured, and his mouth gagged.⁵³ For several days and nights he is “borne . . . like a corpse” across the Mason-Dixon line with only a vague sense of where he has been taken.⁵⁴ This journey thus represents a different type of corpse-hopping: a political metempsychosis in which he literally crosses the border between northern and southern bodies politic.⁵⁵ The change in environment alters his political self as well; although he retains the same consciousness, the move across the Mason-Dixon line transforms him from a philanthropic Quaker to an abolitionist. He finds himself in a strange environment and can only piece together his location (and political identity) through associations.

Perhaps the most interesting moment in Lee-as-Longstraw’s reassembly of the world around him occurs when he hears “a shuffling of feet, as of people engaged in a dance, while a voice, which I knew, but its undoubted Congo tang, could be none by a negro’s, sang, in concert with the fiddles,—

‘Ole Vaginnee! nebber ti—ah!

Kick'm up, Juba, a leetle high—ah,—”⁵⁶

It is at this moment that he realizes that he is no longer in Jersey, but has been transported to Virginia. That this realization is constructed around a reference to Juba is important to my argument in several ways. What was termed the “Pattin’ Juba” dance was frequently seen on plantations in the antebellum United States, imported originally from West Africa and more recently from Haiti. That the first mention we get of southern U.S. slaves in the text is through a dance tied to Haiti seems noteworthy, particularly in light of the slave rebellion that soon follows in the text.⁵⁷ This reference is also telling as Juba was a North African prince who figured prominently in Addison’s *Cato*, a figure whose national (and perhaps racial) outsidership leads to a conflicted sense of self and helps fuel the tragedy. Addison’s Juba rejects his own African past by imitating Cato, occupying another person’s identity, an example Bird was familiar with. Cato became an important reference point for the American and French revolutions; for Burke, Cato’s “varieties of untried being” were used to articulate what Burke saw as experimental political forms.⁵⁸ In addition to helping Lee situate himself in the south through the association with negro dance, Bird’s reference also signals a shift in his novel from individual to political concerns.

The figure of Juba also serves as an important transatlantic literary marker of race and animality at the turn of the nineteenth century—a marker that Bird taps into. Maria Edgeworth’s *Belinda* serves as an interesting precursor to Bird in this regard.⁵⁹ Edgeworth’s Juba is a black African (and West Indian) servant who ultimately marries a white farm girl (until that gets removed from the third edition). Conversations about interracial marriage and miscegenation circulated throughout antebellum America, and the possibility of hybridity was central to debates about racial indistinction in this period. The most common arguments against miscegenation tended to depict blacks

as little more than animals, which makes the depiction of blacks in *Belinda* and *Sheppard Lee* so interesting. In *Belinda*, for example, Juba is also the name of a dog, which leads to this exchange with Mr. Vincent:

“Juba is, without exception, the best creature in the universe.”

“Juba, the dog, or Juba, the man?” said Belinda: “you know, they cannot be both the best creatures in the universe.”

“Well! Juba, the man, is the best man—and Juba, the dog, is the best dog, in the universe,” said Mr. Vincent, laughing, with his usual candour, at his own foible, when it was pointed out to him.⁶⁰

The confusion about Juba as human or animal here is also present in Bird’s novel. Just as negro slaves are first identified by Lee-as-Longstraw for their “Juba” song and dance, when Lee finds himself inhabiting the body of Tom, a black slave, we are asked again to interrogate human-animal distinctions the way Mr. Vincent does for his Juba(s) in *Belinda*. When Lee-as-Tom first sees his little master, Tommy, he tells us, “I had an unaccountable longing come over me to take him on my back and go galloping on all-fours over the grass at the door.”⁶¹ Tom’s joy at playing animal blurs the lines between a human, a slave, and a pet. He continues later in the text as Tommy runs up to him again: “down I dropped on my hands and knees, and taking him on my back, began to trot, and gallop, and rear, and curvet over the lawn. . . . [I] enjoyed this foolish sport just as much as Tommy the rider.”⁶² The language of Juba in *Sheppard Lee* and *Belinda* places blacks in a space that perpetually calls selfhood (and specieshood) into question and puts the politics of slavery front and center.

I call attention to the crossing of the Mason-Dixon line and Bird’s Juba narrative because these passages highlight the extent to which Bird engages with environmental and social constructions of racial inferiority that speak directly to his

particular historical moment. As Lee crosses into the U.S. south and transforms into a black slave, Bird tacitly acknowledges that in order to transform people into property, you must minimize those qualities that make them human. He was well aware that literature of the early nineteenth century began to portray “the negro” as a savage in stronger terms than those that had been used for blacks (or even the Irish) earlier in American history. This was a major transformation in thought about who, or what, Africans were considered in antebellum America.

American intellectuals appropriated and rigidified human categories that had been established by European scholars during the eighteenth century. They ignored, however, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's observation that human groups blend insensibly into one another, so that it is impossible to place precise boundaries around them. When Samuel Morton, one of Bird's colleagues, initiated the field of craniometry in the 1830s, proponents of race ideology received the most powerful scientific support yet. By measuring the insides of crania collected from many populations, he offered “evidence” that the Negro had a smaller brain than whites, with Indians in-between. Indeed, the 1830s saw the rise of an “American school” of ethnologists such as Samuel Morton, Samuel Cartwright, Louis Aggasiz, Josiah Nott, and George Glidden. These men became widely trusted voices on behalf of polygenism and the natural inferiority of some races. Their rise represents a move away from the monogenetic, environmentalist narratives of figures like Stanhope Smith, or a move away from the idea that human variation was a function of climate or geography rather than innate differences between races. As a trained doctor, Bird was certainly aware of these ongoing debates, and the political consequences of racial science. It was against their backdrop that he anonymously published *Sheppard Lee*, and against this backdrop we must read his depictions of slavery and race at the end of his novel.

Looby points out the complicated transformation that occurs when Lee inhabits the body of Tom, as here Lee loses his previous identity more fully than before, a development which may point toward a belief in something inherently inferior in the biological makeup of Africans. Initially, his past selves seem to disappear, as only the memories and mind of Tom are present within Lee-as-Tom. He reports:

I found myself, for the first time in my life, content, or very nearly so, with my condition, free from cares, far removed from disquiet, and, if not actually in love with my lot, so far from being dissatisfied, that I had not the least desire to exchange it for another. . . . I forgot that I once had been a freeman, or, to speak more strictly, I did not remember it . . . I had ceased to remember all my previous states of existence.⁶³

This comment seems to privilege the materiality of the self while also playing into the racial stereotypes of the period. Lee's memory as a slave raises questions about black bodies, black memories, their contentedness with the present, their relationship to the status of human, and their participation in history. Indeed, Tom exists as a distinct self apart from Lee until a chance encounter with an abolitionist tract reminds him that he knows how to read: "It was a question I could not well answer; for, as I said before, the memory of my past existence had quite faded from my mind: nevertheless, I had a feeling in me as if I *could* read."⁶⁴ Here literacy allows him access to associations that call forth an otherwise dormant consciousness of himself as Lee. It also leads to a "revolution" in feelings as the promise of freedom, equality, and natural rights also brings forth a sense of fear among the slaves, who "for the first time in their lives . . . beheld [the master's] approach with terror."⁶⁵ We are suddenly asked to think of Lee-as-Tom as a white man in a black body.

The ability to read exposes the dissonance between the institution of slavery and U.S. principles of democracy. Lee-as-Tom recounts his experience of reading the abolitionist pamphlet by noting that “the very next paragraph was opened by the quotation from the Declaration of Independence, that ‘all men were born free and equal,’ which was asserted to be true of all men, negroes as well as others.”⁶⁶ To that, a fellow slave named Governor, offers his thoughts on personhood and slavery:

Declaration of Independence say *dat*? Gen’ral Jodge Washington, him make *dat*; and Gen’ral Tommie Jefferson, him put hand to it! “All men born free and equal.” A nigga is a man! Who says *no* to *dat*? How come Massa Cunnel to be massa den?⁶⁷

The paradox of slavery and democracy, expressed simply by Governor, becomes for the slaves an assertion of their own humanity. This new knowledge breeds fear among the slaves when they encounter their master, perhaps a tacit admission by Bird that the promise of freedom—what Lee-as-Tom refers to as a “revolution in our feelings”—breeds terror, particularly in the wake of the Haitian revolution.⁶⁸ As Bird was aware, the specter of Haiti haunted the many slave rebellions of antebellum America, and rebellion is what follows in *Sheppard Lee*. The plotting of the slave rebellion, in fact, becomes an explicit commentary on the slaves’ ambition for distinction. It shifts conversations among the slaves to the possibility of becoming kings, presidents, emperors, and constables. It leads many of them to speculate about the possibility of claiming white women as property. It also exposes the deep-seeded fears of interracial desire that marked antebellum American thought—fear of a sexual boundary crossing that would remain taboo well into the twentieth century.

This move also matters because it marks a shift in the tone from earlier in the novel. Simply put, when Lee becomes a slave, the narrative temporarily stops being

funny. While there are moments of humor with Tom once he learns to read and recognizes his status as slave and property (while simultaneously becoming an indistinct self who must grapple with the remnants of his memory as Lee), the story quickly becomes a more recognizable Gothic horror. At no point is this more clearly felt than when Lee-as-Tom describes the slave rebellion against his masters that he helped to initiate. The most troubling example of this Gothic horror occurs when his master (and namesake) Little Tommy comes running to him for protection, vowing never to hit him again: “As for the boy, he caught sight of me, and sprang into my arms, entreating me ‘not to let them kill him.’”⁶⁹ Lee-as-Tom goes on to explain that “I would have defended him at that moment with my life, for my heart bled for what had already been done; but he was snatched out of my hands, and I saw no more of him.”⁷⁰ Lee-as-Tom is paralyzed, unable to take responsibility for his own actions and unable to lift a finger to assist either the rebels or his young master. Shortly after, humorous satire becomes lost in a Gothic rendering of violence.

This Gothic terror is tied to the tension between a desire to sympathize with the slaves and a fear for their master’s family. As Julie Ellison notes, “race serves high culture as a way of signifying crises of identification and many degrees and kinds of power.”⁷¹ It is fitting that Bird’s penultimate body is that of a slave—a black body that calls identity and selfhood into question, and leads to the most violent crisis in the text. Ellison notes that “racial discourse signifies traumas of personal identification and political loyalty,” and it is interesting to see how Bird also ties together race and political loyalties (or factions) to comment on two distinctions that separate whites and blacks: hierarchical systems of power and of mobility.⁷² “In affairs of the affections, slaves and political factions are equally unreasonable. The only difference in the effect is, that the one cannot, while the other can, and *does*, change his masters when his

whim changes.”⁷³ It is here, then, that we receive the payoff of Bird’s earlier interrogation of consciousness and exploration of accountability. As he shifts his attention from the individual to the political, those questions offer a critique of the paradoxical coexistence of democracy and slavery.

So how does the issue of slavery speak to questions of accountability discussed earlier? Whereas Locke thinks accountability finds its ultimate guarantee in religion, Bird asks us to think about a politics of accountability and the ways in which political and biological indistinction disrupt accountability to a degree that threatens democracy as a viable option. If *Sheppard Lee* is initially a story about the powerlessness of form to hold a person together, by its end it becomes a story about the powerlessness of form to hold a democracy together. The tension between the Constitution and the institution of slavery is one example of this. By making a Gothic turn into questions of slavery, Bird presents a paradox of selfhood as it applies to the antebellum United States. For Locke, there are actions you’ve done and forgotten, or which you choose not to think about. And he would argue that you are temporarily off the hook there—until you are before God. Yet Bird seems to be asking the United States to think about the earthly consequences of forgetting in terms of slavery. What does the existence of this institution do for a public consciousness in the United States? If Bird invokes a political tradition in which the multitude has the ability to take new forms, yet those forms can still lead to the sort of violent encounters we see with Tom, what are we left with? The instability of form ultimately produces an instability of selves.

I want to take a moment to connect this back to the ways in which previous authors formed their politics in response to Burkean politics of distinction. If we look back on Burke’s writings about democracy, we find that his argument hinges on the

belief that individuals are not capable of being accountable to themselves or others. That, instead, becomes the role of customs and institutions, which is why he argues so fiercely for their persistence (and the persistence of the distinctions that fix them in place).⁷⁴ Democracy, on the other hand, depends on individuals holding themselves accountable. Without such accountability, democracy cannot work. In this context, Bird's depiction of a man who can't even render himself distinct thus challenges the viability of democracy. Bird draws on Lee turning into a slave at the end to challenge the ability of individuals to be accountable in the ways democracy might require. Bird's novel, then, demonstrates how tempting the rhetoric of indistinction can be, even as Bird situates indistinction as a problem inherent to democracy—or at least a democracy that maintains the types of species and rank distinctions in place that would allow slavery to coexist alongside the promise of equality.

Although this section of my chapter illustrates an important turn to the Gothic in *Sheppard Lee*, we should recognize that the Gothic and the satirical do not remain easy partners. Just as the shift from Philadelphia to Virginia—and from Longstraw to Tom—becomes a structural moment around which the novel turns, Tom's lynching marks another structural shift back to the satirical mode used earlier. The concluding chapters of the novel, however, do not back away from the larger political questions raised by Lee's experience as a slave. *Sheppard Lee* literalizes the idea of democracy as one person being radically equal to another, producing unstable, indistinct selves. The instability is present throughout the novel, but against the backdrop of slavery (and the slave rebellion itself) that instability leads to an important question: if democracy cannot be held accountable to its constitution—its form—because of its relationship to slavery, what are we left with? In the next section, I will conclude by examining the

brief and satirical end to Bird's novel, which engages that question by taking formlessness to an extreme that calls the category of the human into question.

THE POSTHUMANITY OF SHEPPARD LEE

Published only a decade after Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) and nearly two decades after *Frankenstein* (1818), *Sheppard Lee* similarly grapples with issues of reanimation and human plasticity at the end of his novel, only to transform those questions into an examination of the psychological state of nineteenth-century American politics. At the end of *Sheppard Lee*, we are left with an ambivalent turn to boundlessness and a nod to the possibility of a posthuman future—a tacit admission that perhaps the category of the human is not sufficient for radical equality. The ability to blur the boundary between life and death is always tied to the question of whether or not there is something valuable in humanity worth sustaining, or, perhaps, whether mortality is itself a defining feature of the human—a premise that retains currency in contemporary science fiction and modern scientific discourse. Yet unlike *The Last Man*, in which Shelley's turn to the posthuman demonstrated a repressed desire for radical equality, Bird's final chapters are more difficult to pin down. In what follows, I examine the satirical return to the posthuman at the end of *Sheppard Lee*, with some reflections on the political implications of this return.

The posthumanity of Lee is interesting in that—unlike the galvanic experiment in Shelley's *Frankenstein*—his reanimation does not motivate the Gothic horror of the novel. On the heels of being lynched, Lee-as-Tom's body becomes the subject of a series of galvanic experiments.⁷⁵ On being reanimated, he explains:

The first thing I did upon feeling the magical fluid penetrate my nerves, was to open my eyes and snap them twice or thrice; the second to utter a

horrible groan, which greatly disconcerted the spectators; and the third to start bolt upright on my feet, and ask them, “what the devil they were after?” In a word, I was suddenly resuscitated.⁷⁶

While the attending gentlemen immediately flee in terror, the novel once again turns to humor as it depicts a rather comic scene: all the participants flee but one man, Arthur Megrim, who instead dies of fright on the floor. Lee-as-Tom quickly takes possession of this man’s body, only to have Tom’s own dead body fall upon Lee-as-Megrim as soon as the transmigration takes place—knocking the wind out of him. Leaving behind the authentically terrifying scenes of a slave rebellion and lynching, Bird returns to a more recognizably satirical mode. Yet the seriousness and political breadth of the questions he raises as Tom now inevitably subtend these final moments of satire.

It is in this mode that Bird most emphatically begins to challenge the boundaries of the human. Lee’s awakening as Megrim, for example, offers a convincing echo of Edgar’s “savage awakening” in the cave—a moment of physically painful, perhaps even lycanthropic (considering Megrim’s later belief that he is a dog), transformation. Lee writes of his experience, “I awoke late on the following morning, feeling very comfortable, notwithstanding the bruises on my ribs. . . . Indeed this was my only feeling. I woke to a consciousness, though a vague one, of the change in my condition.”⁷⁷ He struggles similarly (almost immediately) with a bout of indigestion, with sleep and appetite his only desires and concerns. This seems to be a similarly animalistic change (albeit a much lazier one), as Lee-as-Megrim experiences a “savage appetite” in his new body and can only focus on that need.⁷⁸ His indigestion is interesting, less because of its representation of a nonhuman transformation (as seen in Brown) than for its commentary on freedom. Having just abandoned his life as a slave, Lee-as-Megrim writes this of his digestion:

And as for independence, the idea was a mockery; the servitude of a galley-slave was freedom, unlimited license, compared with my subjection to dyspepsy, and—for the truth much be confessed—the doctor; to whom I was at last obliged to submit.⁷⁹

This comment on indigestions raises the question about the relationship between indigestion (here seen as a form of subjugation) and freedom. As discussed in my chapter on Brown, we might think about indigestion as a form of expansion or a representation of the tension between expansion and containment. If we map this onto Bird's novel, does the turn to the posthuman become a necessary condition for the types of painful expansionist practices of Jacksonian America? Indigestion seems a fitting representation of Bird's expansionist politics. If the imperialist nature of expansion is a consuming process (digestion), indigestion exposes a tension between expansion and containment. Lee-as-Megrim's indigestion depicts a conflict between voracious biological and political appetites of the antebellum United States and attempts to draw boundaries around the human and the nation.

The challenges to Megrim's own boundaries highlight not only his posthumanity but also his attempts to contain those transgressions. His character offers the most explicit posthuman experiences, if the least believable. Instead of getting better after treating his indigestion, Lee-as-Megrim wakes one day "converted into a coffee-pot; a transformation which I thought so much more extraordinary than any other I had ever undergone."⁸⁰ After Tibbikens "cures" him by threatening to warm him, he wakes the next day "seized with a rage of a most unaccountable nature, and falling on my hands and feet, I responded to the animal's cries, and barked in like manner, being quite certain I was as much of a dog as he."⁸¹ After being assaulted by Tibbikens with a horse whip, he then imagines himself an icicle before "[experiencing] divers other

transformations, being now a chicken, now a loaded cannon, now a clock, now a hamper of crockery-ware, and a thousand things besides.”⁸² Lee-as-Megrim finally imagines himself as human again, although fully convinced he is the emperor of France. That his final transformation places him in a position of lofty rank and power seems fitting. The reference to France also calls to mind the violent revolutionary politics of France and Haiti at the turn of the century, and the equally violent attempts to contain those politics in the revolutionary aftermath.

With all these transformations, Tibbikens tortures Megrim as a form of curing him—and by cure, here, I mean the (re)imposition of boundaries to contain Megrim as a human and a self. “In this way,” Lee writes, “if I was not cured of my disease, I was, at least, brought into subjection.”⁸³ With each transformation, Lee is violently trained not to transform, not to change, not to be free. “I therefore took good care, when bewailing my hard fate, not to charge it, as I at first did, to the democratic wrath and jealousy of my tormentors.”⁸⁴ Lee-as-Megrim is violently taught and conditioned not to cross boundaries, and he describes each cure as a “return to rationality,” noting that “I made no attempt to tear them to pieces.”⁸⁵ Being cured, then, is an act of becoming human and having the boundaries of acceptable human behavior strictly enforced. Lee goes on to explain:

In this manner I was cured of hypochondriasis; for although I felt, ever and anon, a strong propensity to confess myself a joint-stool, a Greek demi-god, or some other fanciful creature, I retained so lively a recollection of the penalties I had already paid for indulging in such vagaries, that I put a curb to my imagination, and resolved for the future to be nothing but plain Mr. Megrim, a gentleman with a disordered digestive apparatus.⁸⁶

Again, we are left with a disordered digestive system, a system that has been muddled by conflicting attempts to expand and be contained. Similarly, Megrim ends up disordered as a result of his attempts at boundary crossing that are repeatedly and violently contained by the doctor. By the end, he has lost any agency as a self, becoming nearly inanimate. Even when he leaves the house, it is in a nearly unconscious mode at the doctor's direction: "I followed him mechanically."⁸⁷ He has been convinced of his madness and is subjected to strict diets and routines.

While the transformations of Lee-as-Megrim are quickly dismissed as madness, this violent curing of his hypochondria merely sets the stage for a more fully-realized attempt to transform or alter the human body when Tibbikens takes him to visit Dr. Feuerteufel's medical show. Perhaps echoing the use of body parts in *Frankenstein*, Lee-as-Megrim describes the display of seemingly infinite pieces of the human body: "[The show] consisted of an infinite variety of fragments from the bodies of animals and human beings . . . Tibbikens assured me they were real specimens, taken from animal bodies, and converted by scientific process."⁸⁸ As they walk, Tibbikens proudly proclaims the virtues of chemistry to Megrim. The conversation around chemistry is striking; it is the science of transformation, one whose function is to break the boundaries between categories. Chemistry emphasizes the chemical bonds formed between species (a form of sympathy) and the formation of new substances/species. Alchemy, a precursor to chemistry, was said to include drawing the spirits from bodies and bonding the spirits within bodies—making chemistry central to conversations about metempsychosis.⁸⁹ Tibbikens' praise of chemistry thus provides an interesting commentary on Lee's own transformations: "Davy, Lavoisier, Berzelius . . . how little they knew of the true science of chymistry! They stopped short at the elements—our doctor here converts one element into another!"⁹⁰ If, as Tibbikens insinuates, scientific

indistinction is possible at the elemental level, what does this say about the possibility of biological indistinction in complex organisms such as humans?

Feuerteufel addresses this question as he explains his goals to his visitors. He introduces himself as “a friend of de species human” as he discusses the posthuman possibilities of human preservation.⁹¹ Lee-as-Megrim has already seen heads and other body parts preserved as stone, indurated, embalmed, etc. Yet the doctor has higher ambitions than turning humans into statues; as he unveils his final display, he boasts that “you shall see how mosh petter it is tan de statues marple . . . py my process, make him indestructeeble, and not to alter for ever.”⁹² Here Lee-as-Megrim encounters the body of Sheppard Lee himself, “looking entirely like a living being, except that the eyes were fixed in a set unnatural stare, and the attitude was a little stiff and awkward.”⁹³ Feuerteufel begins to explain the benefits of mummification as a process of preservation and as a public health concern:

De poddie is made incorruptible, proof against de water, vat you call water-proof. It is de process for de peoples in zheneral; and I do hopes to see de day ven it shall pe in universal adopt by all, and no more poddies put into de earth to rot, and to make de pad health for de peoples dat live. It is de shtyle for de unwholesome countrees. Zhentlemens, you have know dat de Egyptians did make all dare friends mumme. Why for dey do dat? Very good reason. De land upon de Nile vas unwholesome, and de purrying of de poddies made it vorse.⁹⁴

Here Feuerteufel makes clear the interdependent relationship between human bodies and the environment, as bodies have a biological effect on climate and vice versa. The German doctor also echoes the writings of Buffon and C.F. Volney in making his claims about unwholesome environments specific to America: “I have devise my plan

for de benefit of America, vich is de most unwholesome land in de earth, full of de exhalation and de miasm, de effluvium from de decay animal and vegetable.”⁹⁵ The human body, then, is put in conversation with the bodies of other animals and even vegetables in its ability to decay, to be made ill, and to be disposed of properly. It is perhaps worth noting that the doctor sees his process as a democratic one, as he plans to make this type of preservation available to all people, not just the rich: “I have de full and complete specimens of de process for make de sheep [cheap] mummee, de mummee of flesh and plood.”⁹⁶ Yet even on this point, the novel struggles with the tension between democracy and slavery. When Lee reoccupies his own body and flees, the doctor chases him through multiple states, repeating “Stop my mummy!”⁹⁷ This reenactment of a body considered property fleeing north while being chased by an owner again places the danger of occupying other bodies alongside the very real tensions over slavery and democracy in nineteenth-century America.

Feuerteufel’s democratic and utilitarian view of human preservation also recalls Lee’s own earlier thoughts on democracy, which similarly reflect a posthuman sensibility. These remarks provide the best representation of Bird’s own politics of indistinction: whereas Shelley’s disenchantment led her to a vision of human extinction and abstract dreams of a posthuman world, Bird embraces an organic and embodied view of posthumanity that only sees the value of humanity extending beyond this life in nonhuman forms—even as those forms remain dependent on the prior construction of human selves. Perhaps the best example of this desire occurs when Lee-as-Skinner makes the conscious decision to switch bodies. At that moment, he pauses for the first time to reflect on his ability to inhabit other corpses:

[T]hat I possessed the power to transfer my spirit, whenever I willed it, from one man’s body to another, and so get rid of any afflictions that

might beset me, was highly agreeable. . . . But there was one drawback to my satisfaction; and that was the discovery which I now made, that men's bodies were not to be had every day, at a moments warning.⁹⁸

Bird imagines himself being able to rid his ailments by crossing the boundaries that separate one human self from another. Unlike Shelley, however, whose characters sought an end to illness and pain by imagining ethereal posthuman creatures that would inhabit the world after them, Bird locates his ability to transcend the human in the body itself. This leads him to the most important digression in his text:

I cannot help observing, that it is an extremely absurd practice thus to dispose of—to squander and throw away, I may call it—the hosts of human bodies that are annually falling dead upon our hands; whereas, with the least management in the world, they might be converted into objects of great usefulness and value.⁹⁹

The first example he gives in this digression seems obvious: Lee suggests that bodies should be used to enrich the soil naturally by making them into manure. Yet his interest in repurposing the human body also leads back to questions about rank and distinction; he satirically offers suggestions for preserving social and political distinctions after death, thus resisting the leveling power of death to turn all humans into mere bodies. He proposes, for example, that the president of the United States could be boiled down to soap, “to be used by his successor in scouring the constitution and the minds of the people” and notes, “the rich and tender would esteem it a cruelty to be disposed of in the same way as the multitude.”¹⁰⁰ Lee then suggests that the multitude could perhaps be converted into spermaceti for candles or lamp posts “whereby those who never shone in life might scintillate as the lights of the public for a week or two after.”¹⁰¹

Perhaps more interesting is that Lee begins to speculate about how these repurposed bodies might still embody the democratic principles of the multitude. He asserts this of the multitude: “Their bones might be made into rings and whistles, for infant democrats to cut their teeth on.”¹⁰² Here, democracy seems to be embodied in the bones themselves of the indistinct multitude. Lee also talks about another option, one that more closely reflects the chemical experiments of Feuersteufel, “converting the human body into different mineral substances. One man changes his neighbour’s bones into fine glass; a second turns the blood into iron; while a third, more successful still, transforms the whole body into stone.”¹⁰³ These reflections lead Lee back to questions about the indistinct self and its political complexion or constitution. If the elements of the body can be rendered indistinct and the promise of humanity might be reduced to material uses of the body after this life (a nonhuman posthumanity), what are we left with? If we are accountable neither to the unstable consciousness of the self, nor to the bodies we inhabit, who can be held responsible for democracy? Bird’s inability to answer that question sufficiently, perhaps, accounts for Lee’s retreat into madness at the novel’s close. Like Shelley, Bird ultimately backs away from the posthuman as something tempting but unsustainable.

I want to conclude by placing the posthuman possibilities presented by Lee alongside the question Lee-as-Skinner asks earlier in the novel: “What mode of existence then was most likely to secure the content that I sought?”¹⁰⁴ While, on a basic level, this is a biological question about selfhood (who Lee wants to be), it is also a deeply political question. This marks the first example of forethought by Lee as he seeks out a new body; with it, he stops being reactionary. If, as I’ve argued, these transformations serve as a type of political commentary, what does it mean for Bird to attack the same reactionary (revolutionary) changes Lee seeks for the first half of the

novel? To what extent does Bird embrace the “varieties of untried being” Burke feared, yet worry about the lack of forethought given to these varieties? This tension perhaps highlights why, ultimately, indistinction is as unsustainable in Bird as it is in Brown and Shelley. Indistinction always destabilizes the political imagination, but it is also endlessly tempting and subtly threatening; it can never stabilize into a utopian vision. This explains why the posthuman visions of Shelley and Bird can never materialize without leading to human extinction or madness. That these authors leave us with reflections on petrification (statues) and/or mummification points to the ways political and biological constructions of the human remain bound by history and mortality.

NOTES

¹ Bird's political views do map quite nicely onto the views of Samuel Stanhope Smith. The Whigs were natural descendants of the Federalists, and Bird's complex relationship to race, politics, and indistinction is reminiscent of the tensions that also haunted Smith's political views. See Chapter 1.

² This turn to madness, if we take it seriously, might make this novel a dystopian vision of indistinction.

³ It is worth noting, however, that Bird does not engage with gender indistinction. He is willing to explore various men, a slave, animals, and inanimate objects—but he never imagines crossing gender boundaries.

⁴ I should note that this is not only about slavery. Immigration, women's rights, temperance, and industrialization were also part of the "radical" changes taking place in this period.

⁵ Like Brown and Shelley, Bird retains a certain ambivalence toward indistinction—he despairs at the possibility that every station in American life is equally miserable. His relationship to expansion and slavery is equally complicated. *Nick of the Woods*—although it interestingly troubles the pervasive savage/civilized distinction in this period—is often criticized as an Indian-hating novel that champions expansionist philosophies. His depiction of Sheppard Lee as a slave late in the novel is already a far cry from his neoclassical depiction of slavery and republicanism seen in his play *The Gladiator*, which was produced only five years earlier. And while he often invokes sympathies towards slaves, Bird also seems ready in his fiction and his public statements to deny the very rights he invokes.

⁶ Although Bird was an admirer of Burke for his rhetoric and republicanism, his novel marks a shift away from a politics of indistinction that is directly engaging with the Burkean politics of an age of democratic revolutions. Instead, against the backdrop of increasingly polarizing debates about the institution of slavery and the nature of humanity for Africans, the politics at play in this period are less about democracy as a revolutionary break with the tyranny of monarchy, and more invested in the increasingly complicated relationship between democracy, expansion, and the institution of slavery. As I argue later, Bird ultimately looks more Lockean than Burkean in his engagement with accountability and form.

⁷ Like other Whigs, Bird saw the revolution and the founders as a classical drama played out on American soil. This is particularly clear in his early dramatic works. I argue that this emphasis on the importance of classical influences, republicanism, and rhetoric aligns Bird with a sense of the sublime that—like we saw with Wollstonecraft—draws on the work of Longinus.

⁸ Cynthia Wall, "The Castle of Otranto: A Shakespeareo-Politico Satire?" in *Historical Boundaries, Narrative Forms: Essays on British Literature in the Long Eighteenth Century in Honor of Everett Zimmerman*, ed. Lorna Clymer and Robert Mayer (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 2007), 185.

⁹ Michael Seidel, *Satiric Inheritance: Rabelais to Sterne* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 4.

¹⁰ Robert Montgomery Bird, *Sheppard Lee: Written by Himself*, ed. Christopher Looby (New York: New York Review of Books, 2008), 140.

¹¹ Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, 140-141.

¹² *Ibid.*, 141.

¹³ Locke, *Human Understanding*, 340-341.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 339.

¹⁵ Bird, 202.

¹⁶ Here I find myself persuaded by Wolfram Schmidgen's reading of Locke in *Exquisite Mixture*, and argue that Bird is also participating in a construction of personhood in which "unity and identity rests on a complicated set of relationships, not on a form or essence." Schmidgen, *Exquisite Mixture: The Virtues of Impurity in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 133. That Bird is not an essentialist is important to understanding the stakes of his later transformation into a black slave.

¹⁷ Bird, 273.

¹⁸ We might note that the name Arthur Megrim is similar to Arthur Mervyn, and that Bird's hero, Walter Scott, also named a character Arthur Mervyn in *Guy Mannering*—presumably after Brown's character.

¹⁹ Bird, 248.

²⁰ Near the end of his chapter on identity, as he explores the relationship between actions, accountability, and selfhood, Locke argues that the *self* is the same as *person*, and that *person* is "a Forensick Term," capable of "appropriating Actions and their Merit." Locke, 346.

²¹ Bird, 47.

²² *Ibid.*, 98.

²³ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

²⁵ Lee's remaining transformations similarly bind sleep and transformation together. When he transfers his spirit into Tom's slave body, for example, he writes: "If thou art dead, my sable brother, yield my spirit a refuge in thy useless body. . . . I had no sooner uttered the words than I fell into a trance." Bird, 327. This particular transformation is notable for its duration. Tom is out of commission for days afterward, only to wake up in a strange, primitive (one might even say savage) place. There he finds himself black, the setting crude, and all men equally miserable, 331-332. In his last transformation before returning to his own body, Lee inhabits Megrim, which he this time refers to as a "translation," and notes, "I fell directly sound asleep," 374. I will return to these transformations in more depth later in the chapter.

²⁶ Bird, 194.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 199.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 212.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 253.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 235.

³² *Ibid.*, 263.

³³ Peter Schwenger, *At the Borders of Sleep: On Liminal Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), vii.

³⁴ Schwenger also writes: "If sleep is a plenum, it is also an absence; and this is not as contradictory as it may sound. In sleep, true sleep stripped of consciousness, we become once more a thing. . . . Sleep is an absence, then—the absence of a self, and of the consciousness that is needed for any knowledge of what is being experienced by whatever is experiencing it." Schwenger, *Borders of Sleep*, x.

³⁵ Bird, 106.

³⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, "Robert M. Bird," in *Essays and Reviews* ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 389-403: 401.

³⁷ Bird, 51.

³⁸ Looby, "Introduction," in *Sheppard Lee*, xvii.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁴⁰ Ibid., xvii.

⁴¹ Note here about how I draw this reading, in part, from Schmidgen. Schmidgen argues that “Locke’s insistence on interdependence teaches us that life and consciousness exist through discontinuities and mutations,” which means “[t]he same man can be different persons.” Schmidgen, *Exquisite Mixture*, 143. This reading serves nicely to highlight the ways in which we might consider Bird a Lockean thinker.

⁴² Bird, 52.

⁴³ Ibid., 73.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 109.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 137.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 235.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 272.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 305.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 306.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 308.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 307.

⁵⁵ Notice that being south of the Mason-Dixon line changes the classification of blacks. It is the line of distinction between free and slave—literally transforms status of beings from human to property.

⁵⁶ Bird, 311.

⁵⁷ It is also somewhat prescient, since Master Juba, the famous dancer, was still a decade away from prominence in the United States when Bird published his novel.

⁵⁸ Cato was similarly present in American political discourse in this period. In 1758, for example, George Washington wrote to Mrs. George William Fairfax: “I should think our time more agreeably spent believe me, in playing a part in Cato, with the company you mention, and myself doubly happy in being the Juba to such a Marcia, as you must make.” Ellison, *Cato’s Tears*, 69.

⁵⁹ Although I do not know of a certainty that Bird read *Belinda*, I do find it unlikely that he was unfamiliar with Edgeworth’s work. He made good use of the libraries at the New Castle Academy, the Germantown Academy, and the University of Pennsylvania throughout the 1820s, catalogues which included Edgeworth’s novels. As an important influence on Sir Walter Scott, Bird’s favorite author, and arguably the most famous British novelist until Scott, it seems quite likely that Bird encountered *Belinda*.

⁶⁰ Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda*, ed. Kathryn J. Kirkpatrick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 346.

⁶¹ Bird, 336.

⁶² Ibid., 339.

⁶³ Ibid., 341.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 350.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 354.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 353.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 305.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 366.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ellison, 48.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Bird, 357.

⁷⁴ A Foucauldian reading of the nineteenth century might argue that accountability increases in this period from institutions to individuals. As such, Bird's conflation of individuals and institutions highlighted earlier is rather striking.

⁷⁵ Although it is perhaps obvious, we should note that this is not the first reanimation in the novel, merely the only one to involve galvanism. Similar language can be found as Lee inhabits the body of Dulmer: "I was brought to life again, greatly to the triumph of my tormentors, before the appearance of a physician; who, however, subsequently assured me they had revived me with such effect as to give him double trouble to keep me in the land of the living afterward; for it seems, after being more dead than alive all that night, I had remained in a kind of stupor all the following day, from which I awoke on the second morning, well enough, as the doctor prognosticated I would be, but only after I had remained more than thirty-six hours in a state of insensibility." Bird, 110.

⁷⁶ Bird, 373.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 379.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 382.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 392.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 393.

⁸² Ibid., 394.

⁸³ Ibid., 396.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 397.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 398.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 399.

⁸⁹ One etymology of chemistry indicates that the term originally comes from the word alchemy, which is described as an earlier set of practices that included elements of chemistry, metallurgy, philosophy,

astrology, astronomy, mysticism and medicine; it was commonly thought of in relation to the goal of turning lead or other materials into gold. The word has a contested etymology, however, and may also trace its history alongside meanings such as attraction, affinity, and mixture.

⁹⁰ Bird, 400.

⁹¹ Ibid., 401.

⁹² Ibid., 403. Statues or the statuesque are present throughout the novel, often representing a lack of energy or vigor. Lee himself is initially described as lacking energy; indeed, it is the initial cause of his problems: “My natural disposition was placid and easy,—I believe I may say sluggish. I was not wanting in parts, but had as little energy or activity of mind as ever fell to the share of a Jerseyman . . . Ambition was a passion that never afflicted my mind,” 10-11. One might argue that the entire novel is an attempt to reanimate (or re-humanize) Lee. Later in the text, Lee writes: “I had not the power to stir; horror and astonishment chained me to the corner, where I stood as it transformed to stone, unable even to vent my feelings in a cry,” 245. Crying is human, but remains inaccessible. Lee, instead, becomes statuesque, with no power to move. Additional examples include Lee claiming that “human nature was of the nature of stone” and—when trying to rid himself of Skinner’s body—encountering a body he presumes dead, but it is actually drunkenly asleep, 297. There he writes, “my hand chancing to touch his face, I found it cold as marble,” 234. The statuesque in this novel, much like we saw in Shelley’s *The Last Man*—represents that liminal space between wakefulness and sleep, and between life and death.

⁹³ Ibid., 405.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 404.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 408.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 227.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 227-228.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 229.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid. Lee also proposes that lovers might be converted into jewels, “or, in case of extreme grief on the part of the survivors, into looking-glasses, where the mourners would find a solace in the contemplation of their own features,” 229-230. He goes on to write, “But I would confine the process of petrification to those in whom Nature had indicated its propriety by beginning the process herself. None could with greater justice claim to have their bodies turned into stone, than those whose hearts were of the same material; and I should propose, accordingly, that such a transformation of bodies should be made only in the case of tyrants, heroes, duns, and critics,” 230.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 240.

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